



AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL
U.S. PERSIAN MEDIA STUDY

Final Synthesis Report

October 6, 2017

In April 2017, the American Foreign Policy Council was commissioned by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (hereinafter “the BBG”) to carry out an independent third-party review of programming on the Voice of America’s Persian Service and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Radio Farda. The objective of the study was to examine relevant content for accuracy of reporting, institutional bias, and major flaws, with the goal of providing the BBG with an assessment of contemporary U.S. international broadcasting into Iran.

This report constitutes the final assessment of that study. It is intended to synthesize and summarize the findings of the panelists, as well as to offer a series of recommendations for near-term action to be undertaken by the BBG in order to correct problems and shortfalls relating to Persian-language programming.

COVERAGE OF THE IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

Because of its prominence in the Washington policy debate and its relevance to the overall state of U.S.-Iranian relations, reporting on the Iran nuclear deal (commonly known as the JCPOA) has been understandably robust on both the VOA and Radio Farda. In the aggregate, coverage was found to generally tilt toward positive views of the agreement and its provisions—a state of affairs that was broadly consistent with the prevailing official outlook of the Obama administration while it was in office. Nevertheless, at least some attention was paid to criticisms of the agreement from Congressional opponents, as well as to those of outside experts, who were periodically invited to explain their views of the agreement. Often, however, such critiques were aired as part of debate or panel formats, in which the composition of the panels themselves gave the appearance of being weighted in favor of proponents of the deal (See “recommendations” section).

More broadly, however, coverage of the JCPOA on both the Voice of America and Radio Farda was found to consistently lack broader context. Little to no effort was made, either by hosts or journalists, to explain the limitations of the agreement itself, or the detrimental side effects generated by it, or the implications of the deal for U.S. policy in the broader region. Similarly, in the media reports reviewed, only minimal effort was made to explain the reasoning and rationale behind the Trump administration’s different, and far more negative, view of the agreement. Simply put, Iranians were told in detail that the Obama White House supported the agreement, and why. They have not been afforded the same explanations of current administration policy.

COVERAGE OF U.S. MIDEAST POLICY

The coverage reviewed by the panelists generally offered consistent, impartial reportage on the conflict in Syria, as well as of U.S. policy towards it. However, reporting on broader U.S. policy in the region was found to be far more spotty, and included failures to properly contextualize and explain the priorities, considerations and objectives of the new Administration. At the same time, at least some of the guests invited on the air on Voice of America programming espoused deeply negative, even conspiratorial, views of U.S. actions and priorities in the region without being authoritatively rebutted. In the material reviewed, this problem was significantly more pronounced on VOA than on Radio Farda, despite the latter's geographic location in Prague (rather than Washington, DC).

COVERAGE OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONS

The media clips examined as part of this study consistently suffered from a lack of substantive discussion regarding the institutions, procedures and workings of the U.S. government. Given the location of the Voice of America in Washington, DC, this represents an enormous missed opportunity to educate the Iranian public about the U.S. system of government—and about the workings of Congress and agencies within the Executive Branch. This failing is particularly striking because, as at least some of the panelists found, callers to various VOA programs expressed a clear desire to learn more about democratic processes (and to contrast them to Iran's unrepresentative system of government). More often than not, however, these lines of inquiry were not pursued or were actively discouraged by the program's hosts.

COVERAGE OF IRANIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS AND CONDITIONS

The Islamic Republic's repressive political system and its unequal treatment of minorities and political dissidents is, rightly, a major focus of official U.S. broadcasting toward Iran, and reporting in this field was generally found to be robust. A number of the media clips reviewed by the panelists addressed the plight of minorities in Iran, including Zoroastrians, Sunnis, Christians and practitioners of the Baha'i faith. Others tackled issues of corruption and bribery by regime authorities. And some featured progressive discussions of Iranian culture, social conventions and the relevance of democratic values.

These themes and issues are matters of the utmost importance to Iranian viewers, and—to the extent that it is possible to do so—coverage of them should be expanded and strengthened in keeping with the BBG's larger mission "to inform, engage and connect people around the world in support of freedom

and democracy.” Notably, coverage of Iranian internal politics, as well as human rights conditions and societal trends within the Islamic Republic, was found to be markedly more robust on Radio Farda than on VOA. This represents a comparative bright spot in the BBG’s overall broadcasting toward Iran.

COVERAGE OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Coverage of Iranian foreign policy on both the VOA and Farda was found to be rather problematic, owing to a pervasive lack of context. In the media segments reviewed by the panelists, there were repeated instances of the use of official regime statements as the baseline for stories in a manner that left the Iranian assertions unchallenged. Moreover, instances of problematic Iranian regional behavior (e.g., Iran’s extensive—and deeply harmful—activities in the Syrian theater in support of the Assad regime) were addressed sparsely, if at all. By contrast, both hosts and guests on a number of programs reviewed sought to portray the Islamic Republic as a constructive actor in the region—and a stalwart opponent of the more insidious threat of Sunni extremism. This dynamic, on the whole, perpetuated to audiences the appearance of pro-regime propaganda, rather than objective reporting, on the part of both the VOA and Farda.

COVERAGE OF U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS

In keeping with the services’ generally positive view of the 2015 nuclear deal (described above), significant coverage of the state of U.S.-Iranian relations reflected the mistaken notion that the Iranian regime is now friendlier to the United States. In addition to being empirically untrue, the lack of detailed, sophisticated discussion on this topic did a disservice to the larger strategic objective of the BBG to explain U.S. policy toward Iran, and America’s legitimate concerns and grievances regarding the conduct of the Iranian regime beyond its handling of the “nuclear file.”

Additionally, in the aggregate, reportage on bilateral relations between the U.S. government and the Iranian regime conveyed an impression of equivalence between the parties, a position that is both surprising and improper for broadcasting that is funded by the U.S. government. It is also deeply misleading, insofar as it conflates the Iranian regime with the Iranian people, whereas the U.S. government opposes the former while supporting the latter.

COVERAGE OF ISRAEL

Coverage of Israel on both VOA and RFE/RL, when it occurred, was generally found to be even-handed. Notably, however, while the U.S. government’s attitudes toward Israel are on the whole favorable, those of the Iranian regime

are not. Consequently, attention must continue to be paid to news coverage that repeats the negative characterizations of Israel articulated by official Iranian news sources uncritically, without providing the proper context for the positions of these sources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions above provide a snapshot of the current state of official U.S. Persian-language broadcasting, and give indications of what can and should be improved by the BBG in order to optimize its informational outreach to the Islamic Republic. A number of those are encapsulated in the recommendations detailed below, which represent the consensus view of the study's panelists.

RECOMMENDATION I: *More fundamental review needed*

By its nature, any study limited strictly to the review of media content produced by PNN and Radio Free Europe is incomplete. A variety of other factors—including production values, staffing and so forth—have a direct bearing upon the appearance and effectiveness of U.S. broadcasting toward Iran. To truly assess the impact, output and deficiencies of current VOA Persian and Radio Farda programming, it is necessary for the Broadcasting Board of Governors to “broaden the aperture” in one or more future studies to examine such relevant indices as well. Only in this way will it be possible to gauge whether U.S. broadcasting is operating at maximum efficiency and effectiveness. It is the strong impression of the panelists that the BBG’s broadcasting toward Iran currently is not.

RECOMMENDATION II: *Appoint an ombudsman for Persian media*

The BBG’s Persian language broadcasting has, over the years, come under fire from various corners for inaccurate reporting, institutional bias and controversial journalism. While some of these charges are valid, many are not. However, the BBG currently lacks an authoritative mechanism by which to rebut these charges—or even to systematically investigate them in a transparent manner. The appointment of a dedicated professional (preferably selected with input from Congress) to serve as an impartial ombudsman for the BBG relating to Persian-language broadcasting would help centralize the institutional responses to such complaints, and send a strong signal to interested parties that the BBG is taking a more hands-on managerial role in guaranteeing the integrity of the content put out by the relevant services. So, too, would the publication, at regular intervals, of the findings of investigations by said ombudsman into viewer/listener complaints and allegations. Such activities would demonstrate an ongoing good-faith effort on the part of the BBG to respond to and address the concerns of consumers of media content, as well as of Congressional overseers.

RECOMMENDATION III: *Greater monitoring of guest diversity*

Airing a full range of political viewpoints and ideological perspectives is essential to the BBG's mission of providing coverage of trends in the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the moment, however, it is unclear whether this is in fact taking place. In the course of our study, the American Foreign Policy Council repeatedly requested from the BBG a comprehensive list of guests that had appeared on both Voice of America and RFE/RL over the past year—or, barring that, a representative sampling from a given month of such appearances. We were unable to obtain either. BBG management informed the review panel that a systematic process for tracking this was not in place, and that compilation of such a list would be both time consuming and difficult.

This represents a significant shortfall, in terms of functionality as well as policy. The absence of such a capability contributes to the appearance of potential bias on the part of both VOA and RFE/RL, and allows political partisans of various stripes to claim that their opinions are intentionally underrepresented in favor of other viewpoints. Fortunately, this state of affairs is easily correctable through the establishment of a comprehensive and regularly updated database designed to track guest appearances—including the guests' institutional affiliation, their political outlook, and their areas of expertise. Such a system, if established by BBG management and actively curated by professional staff, can be shared at will with Congressional overseers and/or critics in the media, and will provide a powerful rebuttal to the charge (currently unanswered) that the content and coverage of the services is skewed or biased in some way. At the same time, serious attention should be given to expanding the variety of guests featured on both the VOA and Farda as a way of injecting new voices into the ongoing policy debate about, and within, Iran.

RECOMMENDATION IV: *Balancing guest seniority*

It is a truism in the media sphere that not all commentators are created equal. More prominent personalities have greater gravitas than lesser-known commentators, and this lends their conclusions and positions the perception of greater weight and authority. In order to avoid the *appearance* of imbalance, VOA producers should give thought to the seniority of guests relative to the subject at hand. For instance, media coverage of the JCPOA that juxtaposes a senior official or commentator advocating in favor of the deal against a comparatively junior analyst arguing against the agreement inherently skews viewer perceptions toward the former, even if the arguments of the latter are more compelling and substantive. Attention should be paid to ways in which such perceptions of bias could be eliminated.

RECOMMENDATION V: *Think more strategically about messaging opportunities*

AFPC's review of VOA and RFE/RL programming relating to Iran did not find pervasive evidence of deep, systematic biases or mischaracterizations. However, the media clips reviewed by all of the panelists were rife with what could be called "sins of omission." On multiple subjects, ranging from the Iran nuclear deal to internal Iranian politics, reporting by both outlets was consistently *de minimus* in nature, and failed to provide broader context regarding the topic at hand, or to succinctly rebut Iranian assertions/allegations in an authoritative way. The end result was the appearance of sympathy on the part of the broadcasters with the positions being taken by the Iranian regime. In order to refute and dispel this perception, significant attention must be paid by BBG management to ensuring that the news stories covered include detailed and comprehensive discussion of U.S. positions and arguments, as well as any relevant data that debunks or invalidates incorrect Iranian regime assertions. It should not be acceptable for controversial and/or false statements by the Iranian regime to simply be repeated on American-funded airwaves without relevant context or counterpoint.

RECOMMENDATION VI: *Make communication competitive*

It is vital for the BBG to view its broadcasting efforts not as an isolated initiative, but as part of a larger, and inherently competitive, process. By its nature, the Iranian media market is dynamic, and Iranian viewers have a variety of choices for their consumption of news, commentary and information. These include other foreign broadcasters (such as BBC Persian) and private media outlets (like Manoto), as well as a variety of Iranian regime news sources. In order for U.S. broadcasting to be effective and impactful, it must be tailored to actively compete with these rivals. The U.S. government must pay significant attention to whether its broadcasting toward Iran currently does so effectively, both visually and in terms of content—and, if it does not, assess what steps need to be taken in order to optimize the effectiveness and appeal of its outreach.