

BACKGROUND

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Why America Has Trouble Reaching Iran: VOA's Persian News Network in Dire Need of Reform

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Abstract

The regime that controls Iran is the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, the world's fourth-largest oil producer, and close to acquiring a nuclear weapon. Controlled by this regime are 74 million Iranians, 60 percent of which are under age 30, multitudes of whom reject the fanatic theocracy that tries to separate them from outside ideas. Millions of Iranians hunger not only for news, but for democracy—as evidenced by the Green Movement protests of 2009. For the U.S. government's international broadcasting complex, Iran is a place where a good communication strategy is a necessity; it is also a place of great opportunity. Tragically, America's principal instrument, Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN), has simply not been up to the task.

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Keeping U.S. international broadcasting a priority in an age of budget constraints is a challenging task. Topping the list of countries to which to expand communication, according to Voice of America Director David Ensor, are four clear targets: Pakistan, North Korea, China, and, not least, Iran. Iran represents a unique challenge for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the independent government agency in charge of the U.S. government's non-military international broadcasting and communication assets.

The stakes are high. Iran is the leading sponsor of global terrorism, an aspiring nuclear power, a threat to Middle Eastern stability, and the world's fourth-largest oil producer. Iran is a nation of 74 million people, 60 percent of which are under age 30. Many in the under-30 cohort are thoroughly fed up with life under a fanatic theocracy, and hunger for news of the outside world. For the U.S. government's international broadcasting complex and other Western broadcasters, Iran is a place where a good communication strategy is a necessity; it is also a place of great opportunity. Tragically, America's principal instrument, Voice of America's (VOA) Persian

TALKING POINTS

- Keeping U.S. international broadcasting a priority in an age of budget constraints is a challenging task. Broadcasting to Iran presents a particular challenge.
- The leading sponsor of global terrorism and an aspiring nuclear power, Iran has 74 million people, 60 percent of whom are under age 30—many of which are opposed to the regime in Tehran and hunger for news of the outside world.
- Tragically, America's principal instrument for communicating with Iranians, Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN), is not up to the task.
- PNN is riddled with problems—inadequate language proficiency among staff members; poor morale; focus on Internet communications, which reach far fewer Iranians than do TV and radio; and anti-American and pro-Tehran reporting.
- It is incumbent on the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the leadership of Voice of America to implement reforms that will improve performance and morale at PNN.

News Network (PNN) is simply not up to the task. PNN is riddled with problems that prevent the service from being an effective tool of public diplomacy. Necessary steps to improve U.S. broadcasting to the Iranian people include:

- Thorough vetting of PNN personnel and management hired during the expansion period of 2005 to 2011 to ensure staff professionalism and fluency in Farsi;
- New rules governing contract employees at PNN to ensure equitable treatment in order to raise overall employee morale;
- Creation of a board of advisors drawn from Iran's exile community, with the purpose of monitoring PNN broadcasts and providing feedback on program content;
- Routine congressional oversight hearings of PNN to air questions about programming and management; and
- PNN editors and producers must use U.S. taxpayer resources to provide programming that is anchored in American values, aligned with U.S. national interests, and of the highest professional quality.

Fixing PNN ought to be a priority for the Administration and the Congress. Taking these steps now as part of a comprehensive strategy for dealing with Tehran is essential for addressing one of the most

challenging—and dangerous—foreign policy issues in the world.

How the U.S. Got Here

Voice of America first began radio broadcasts to Iran in the early 1940s. This program, originally called Farsi Service, functioned intermittently until 1979, when the Iranian hostage-taking of U.S. diplomats and capture of the U.S. embassy placed bilateral relations on a hostile footing. Since 1979, U.S. broadcasting to Iran has been on the air continuously in some form or another. In 2001, the service was renamed Persian Service, and in 2007, VOA renamed it again—as the current Persian News Network—and established it as a round-the-clock news network,¹ making PNN the first network of its kind in VOA. As part of VOA, PNN is under the auspices of the BBG. PNN is thus part of a government agency that is entirely supported by taxpayer dollars, running on an annual budget of over \$20 million.² This amount reflects several years of rapid growth. From a staff of 30 and one hour of programming a day in 2007, PNN went to 83 full-time employees, 120 contractors, and six hours of original television programming a day (and one hour of radio) two years later. PNN currently has about 140 full-time employees, more than 60 contract employees, and offers 24 hours of TV and radio programming.

PNN's rapid expansion has been a major contributing factor to the problems that beset the network, concluded a report of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) in 2009. "Rapid growth brought a number

of problems along with it, including questions of program mix and quality and a lingering atmosphere of discontent among employees. Ameliorating them will be a necessary step in the consolidation of VOA's gains in an important broadcasting area," noted the report.³

Two years later, many of these problems persist. PNN continues to be a workplace where contractors complain about unequal treatment, human resource procedures fail the test of transparency (even as articulated in President Barack Obama's January 21, 2009, memorandum on "Transparency and Open Government"), and potential whistle-blowers are terrified of airing complaints for fear of management reprisals. In 2010, a new BBG appointed by President Obama created a committee led by BBG member Enders Wimbush to investigate the root of the problems at PNN. Complaints about the network have been flooding Capitol Hill from the Iranian exile community for several years now. One such complaint was that the executive leadership of the service neither spoke nor understood Farsi and did not have any understanding of Iranian politics. In March of last year, a letter from Representative Trent Franks (R-AZ) to President Obama (co-signed by 69 other Representatives) complained about the network's lack of oversight, staffing, mission, and content. It "may have harmed the plight of those seeking human rights, rather than helped it," Franks wrote. As a consequence, VOA removed the network's director, Alex Belida, in May

1. U.S. State Department and BBG Office of Inspector General, "Report of Inspection: Voice of America's Persian News Network," Report No. ISP-IB-09-27, March 2009, p. 1, at <http://oig.state.gov/documents/organization/126688.pdf> (February 6, 2012).
2. Mehdi Khalaji, "Waste of Dollars: Persian Broadcasting Service in Its Present Form," Iranian.com, December 13, 2011, at <http://www.iranian.com/main/2011/dec/waste-dollars>.
3. U.S. State Department and BBG Office of Inspector General, "Report of Inspection," p. 1.

2011. A new director, Ramin Asmus, a Persian speaker, was brought over from the State Department in January 2011. In May 2011, the leadership of Voice of America announced changes at PNN streamlining the production process.⁴

These changes have not been sufficient. In an unprecedented statement released before Christmas 2011, BBG member Victor Ashe detailed persistent problems at VOA and PNN.⁵

Where the U.S. Is Today

Reaching the Iranian people is not easy. The regime of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has earned its reputation as one of the world's most repressive, and is clearly aware of the danger to its power presented by the information revolution. It ranks as one of the world's most adept at censoring the Internet and at scrambling radio and satellite television transmissions. The protests that followed the flawed presidential election of June 12, 2009, spurred the Iranian government to slow down Internet speed at critical times. An increasing number of Iranian bloggers have been threatened, arrested, tortured, or kept in solitary confinement, and at least one has died in prison.⁶ As the Middle East uprisings toppled regime after regime in 2011, Iran stepped up its jamming of the BBC, Voice of America, and other Western networks with Persian-language news channels.⁷ At the same time Iran has launched its own media offensive with its Islamic Republic of

Iran Broadcaster (IRIB), a huge government corporation that controls the country's radio and television broadcasts.

Front and center of the U.S. government's attempt to reach the Iranian people with independent credible news about the world and information about U.S. policy, is the Persian News Network, the U.S. government's only platform for reaching an Iranian audience directly. The United States has not had an embassy in Tehran for more than 35 years, making VOA the official voice of the United States in Iran. (The U.S. government also funds Radio Farda, which broadcasts 24-hour local Iranian news to Iran. Radio Farda is a part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which is a grantee organization.)

Thus PNN is extraordinarily important to, and receives a great deal of attention within, the U.S. international broadcasting complex. Yet, PNN's mission has not necessarily been clear—even to the people who work there. Is it a news organization? An asset to U.S. foreign policy? The answer has to be that it is both, yet this hybrid status sits awkwardly with many PNN employees (as it does with many other VOA staffers). Until amended by a new management team in 2011, PNN's mission statement asserted that the network's only duty was to report the news. Today, the mission statement remains focused on reporting the news, but a reference to the VOA charter has been added, stating that PNN shares Voice

of America's mission, which includes explaining and reflecting American values and culture as well as U.S. policy. This is important: U.S. international broadcasting is a fundamental part of the U.S. foreign policy and public diplomacy tool kit, and has to encompass information about American society, culture, values and, not least, policies and point of view. In the absence of this dimension, editorial direction and focus is only too easily lost.

Since its inception as a 24-hour network in 2007, PNN has been at the center of controversy. PNN is clearly a strategic asset for the U.S. government; yet bad management, controversial programming and insufficient congressional oversight have made it one of the U.S. international broadcasting complex's most troubled organizations. Personnel morale is extremely low. At the same time, Iranians both inside and outside Iran follow every move of PNN with intense interest, placing it at the center of much gossip and conspiracy theories. Iranian websites with access to leaks from sources within PNN—one of the many problems that need to be addressed—relish reporting on gossip and scandals. Iranian opposition leaders in exile follow its work with intense interest. When asked about the most important thing the U.S. government could do to support political change in Iran, Amir Abbas Fakhraei, an exiled Iranian student leader, former political prisoner, and secretary general of the Confederation of Iranian

4. Helle Dale, "VOA Broadcasting to Iran: A Long-Overdue Housecleaning," Heritage Foundation, *The Foundry* blog, May 5, 2011, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2011/05/05/voa-broadcasting-to-iran-a-long-overdue-housecleaning/>.

5. Victor Ashe, statement to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, December 20, 2011.

6. Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2011," pp. 187-194, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2011> (February 10, 2012).

7. Paul Sonne and Farnaz Fassihi, "In Skies Over Iran, a Battle for Control of Satellite TV," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 2011, at http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB100014240529702035013045770_88380199787036-1MjQjAxMTAxMDIwNzEyNDcyWj.html#ixzz1hlylsnz (February 6, 2012).

Students, stated that two things were critical: (1) tougher oil sanctions and (2) reform of PNN.⁸

Management Structure

PNN is overseen by a director, currently Ramin Asgard, who reports to the director of VOA, currently David Ensor, as well as to VOA's executive editor and the director for language programming. They all report to the director of the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), headed by Richard Lobo, and the BBG itself.

Below the position of PNN director is a level of middle management, and at production level, individual television shows have an executive producer working with a managing editor. A persistent problem is that those in positions of authority at PNN include very few Farsi speakers. At the same time, many of the Farsi-speaking staff members (e.g., scriptwriters, copyeditors, producers, and production assistants) cannot communicate effectively in English. As a result, bilingual members of mid-level management, such as managing editors and executive producers, are often the only point of communication between the director and the employees. Although there is a relatively senior contingent of Iranian-born employees, they are stretched too thin to be able to provide the level of oversight necessary for better performance.

Among the Iranian employees, moreover, there are persistent divisions. Ideologically, most could be described as pro-Western, but there undoubtedly are some who are less

so, which occasionally shows up in the programming.⁹ What is more, it is clear that there are well-informed pro-regime individuals currently working at PNN and providing sensitive internal information to Iranian authorities. This has compromised PNN's ability to serve its mission. Furthermore, Iranian employees often cite a low level of job satisfaction due to hiring and retaining practices based on family or social affiliation rather than professional qualifications.

The combination of full-time employees and contract staff has created a persistent atmosphere of discontent and sense of unfairness. The Office of the Inspector General found that there is no difference between the type of work done by contract employees, also known as "purchase order vendors" and that done by full-time employees. Nor is there any consistent pattern or ratio reflecting the ways the contract workers are employed on various shows. In addition, they are presently required to spend the same number of hours on the job as are full-time employees. Yet, the two categories of employees are treated differently and have different benefits. This is of course the nature of contract work, yet it has a major detrimental effect of personnel morale and satisfaction.

Any issue, small or great, can cause outbreaks of high emotion. Take, for instance, the issue of flu shots, referred to in the December 2011 statement by BBG member Victor Ashe, who raised the issue at the BBG meeting on October 13, 2011, after hearing from highly distressed

PNN contract employees. They did not understand why federal employees were offered free flu shots while they were not, even though they were all working in the same office and presumably had the same opportunity to infect each other. As a matter of symbolism, the issue had great emotional impact. Following BBG intervention, free flu shots were offered to all staffers at PNN.

Suspicious of favoritism also run rampant. The belief that network stars are treated with kid gloves is a cause of deep resentment among the rank and file. A very recent incident, taking place on November 25, 2011, is a case in point, of abusive behavior by a star of one of PNN's most successful shows. The talent in question had a reputation for abusiveness, and verbally attacked a female contract employee with a rant replete with four letter words and sexually explicit language, and he either pushed or threw a chair through the news room. Even though there were several eyewitnesses to the incident, one witness said that the victim of the attack was initially reluctant to complain to PNN's human resources department for fear of reprisals. Initial disciplinary action against the celebrity abuser was a two-week suspension with full pay as a cooling off period, essentially a vacation. The final outcome is pending.

Bloggers and websites in Iran were discussing this incident within a week of its occurrence, before PNN management had taken any action. Very little happens at PNN that is not noted with eager interest in Iran. Indeed, an argument frequently

8. Helle Dale, "VOA Must Do a Better Job at Depicting American Life," Heritage Foundation, *The Foundry* blog, October 25, 2010, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2010/10/25/voa-must-do-a-better-job-at-depicting-american-life/>.

9. Amir A. Fakhraev, "Is America's Overseas Broadcasting Undermining our National Interest and the Fight against Tyrannical Regimes?" testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, April 6, 2011.

advanced on Iranian political websites is that the U.S. government has no business preaching to Iranians about democracy and human rights when its own agencies allow abusive and harassing behavior. *Siahmast.wordpress.com* (currently hacked) and *RadioKoocheh.com* are two such websites. The disarray in the PNN staff and management can only be a source of great satisfaction in Tehran, and undermines the mission of the network.

PNN Programming— and Pro-Iranian Bias?

Not surprisingly the internal divisions are reflected in PNN programming. Accusations of pro-Iranian bias and favoritism in the production of shows are commonly heard from employees and those who follow PNN closely, such as the Iranian Freedom Institute’s “VOA PNN Watchdog.”¹⁰

PNN’s programming includes coverage of American, Iranian, and international news. In 2007, PNN expanded to six hours of original programming and one hour of cultural programming from American television’s History Channel. This rapid expansion resulted in lower quality, and on the recommendation of the OIG, in November 2010, the network cut back to four hours of original broadcasting, which is repeated throughout each 24-hour period. The drop in quality was, not surprisingly, accompanied by a drop in audience share, particularly as BBC Persian, the BBC’s station for

radio and TV broadcasts to Iran, was becoming an alternative, going on the air in 2008.

PNN’s flagship production is *News and Views*, a two-hour television program that airs at 8 p.m. local time in Iran (11.30 a.m. Eastern Standard time), which features live coverage from Capitol Hill and the State Department. PNN’s longest-running TV program, *Roundtable with You*, is in the format of a talk show, hosting popular guests and devoted to current events, pop culture, and politics. Viewers are able to participate by phone and e-mails.¹¹ PNN’s newest addition to its lineup is *Ofogh* (“Horizon” in English), which provides in-depth analysis of U.S.–Iranian relations. Other news programming consists of *Today in Washington*, a brief overview of top headlines; *Newsbriefs*; *Today’s Woman*, a contemporary news program with a pool of regular participants who discuss global women’s issues; *Late Edition* and *New Talk*, both of which air late in the evening.

The show that has recently received the most attention at PNN has been *Parazit* (“Static” in English), a weekly half-hour satirical news show comparable in tone and content to Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show.” In 2011, *Parazit* became the most popular Iranian page on Facebook with over 725,000 fans. The show’s creators, Kambiz Hosseini and Saman Arbabi, are Iranian-born American citizens, both in their 30s. Many of PNN’s internal dynamics are

highlighted by the *Parazit* example, whose 30-something creators are of the same generation as their audience, considerably below the average age of PNN employees.¹² This success has dropped off precipitously in the last year because PNN has not invested enough resources in the show. (*Parazit*’s Hosseini and Arbabi had literally stumbled into their success: With reluctant permission from PNN superiors, they were able to perform a 10-minute skit on another PNN program.)

PNN also has a Facebook page, dedicated YouTube channels, and blogs.¹³ According to the BBG’s strategic plan, expansion of PNN’s Internet presence and the creation of Farsi online news are priorities. Yet, given Iran’s continued and often successful attempts to censor Internet communication, digital media at this point do not present a viable alternative to traditional broadcasting, particularly shortwave and satellite television.

Persistent accusations of pro-Iranian bias among PNN managing editors have been coming from Iranian exiles and some PNN staff itself. In one notable instance, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard attacked Iranian exiled student leader Amir Abbas Fakhavar for criticizing PNN’s own programming. Fakhavar had presented a critical view of PNN at a public event hosted by The Heritage Foundation on October 25, 2010.¹⁴ Subsequently, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

10. Iranian Freedom Institute, VOA PNN Watchdog, at voanpnnwatchdog.blogspot.com (February 6, 2012).

11. U.S. State Department and BBG Office of Inspector General, “Report of Inspection,” p. 11.

12. Khalaji, “Waste of Dollars.”

13. Mary Beth Sheridan, “Persian News Network Finds New Life in Contested Iranian Election,” *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/17/AR2009061703853.html?referrer=emailarticle> (February 6, 2012).

14. Dale, “VOA Must Do a Better Job at Depicting American Life.”

denounced Fakhravar's Heritage talk, in Farsi, on the Revolutionary Guard's "Young Journalists Club" website. The denunciation was then reprinted on Ammariyon, a website belonging to Ansar-e-Hezbollah, the special forces of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei; it also appeared on the U.S.-based Sar-e-khat website.¹⁵

One of PNN's most outspoken critical groups, Fakhravar's Conference of Iranian Students, has monitored PNN over several years. In testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations on April 6, 2011, Fakhravar cited numerous instances of anti-American bias at PNN:

- **April 22, 2007:** PNN host Luna Shad devoted 35 minutes of air-time to an anti-American band and its music video "Democracy," which mocked U.S. troops in Iraq and democratic institutions.
- **August 2, 2007:** *News and Views* opposed U.S. policy in its report on the kidnapping of South Korean Christian missionaries by the Taliban.
- **August 9, 2007:** *News and Views* reported on the atomic bombs dropped over Nagasaki and Hiroshima taking a view opposing the United States.
- **May 8, 9, and 10, 2007:** PNN reported only the negative aspects of bombing in Iraq and implied that the war was a mistake.

- **August 21, 2007:** PNN reported favorably on protests against President George W. Bush's trip to Canada.
- **March 8, 2007:** PNN staff traveled with President Bush on Air Force One to South America and compared Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chávez favorably to President Bush.
- **November 2, 2007:** PNN program on Hiroshima, in which commentators suggested that only an American would be able to drop an atomic bomb.
- **November 6, 2007:** PNN broadcast aired another report critical of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as of the Korean War.
- **December 10, 2010:** The night before one of the most important protests of the Green Movement in Iran, PNN aired an interview with an American Marxist, the gist of which was that the Green Movement is a creation of "American imperialism."¹⁶

Omissions or downplaying of important events are equally indicative of anti-American bias:
 - **June 20, 2009:** The brutal murder of Neda Agha Sultan, a young woman demonstrating for democracy, was captured on a cell phone camera and circulated around the world within

minutes. The graphic images created an international uproar and brought masses of Iranians into the streets. PNN did not show the video for three days, as editors refused to accept the authenticity of the video.

- **February 14, 2011:** Iranians took to the streets again to show the world that the Green Movement was not dead. Two young men were killed during the demonstrations, and PNN did not consider these deaths to be important enough to be a lead news item, placing it eight or ninth in its lineup.¹⁷

A contemporary look at PNN's homepage suggests that even under the new management, questions can be asked about editorial control of the news service. For instance, on January 3, 2012, PNN treated its Iranian audience to a report on religious extremism in Israel (as though there was not enough religious extremism in Iran on which to report). An audience survey asked whether Iran's missile program was "psychological warfare in response to international sanctions" or just "a natural occurrence in the world." Most respondents thought it was "psychological warfare in response to international sanctions."¹⁸

Allegations of anti-American and pro-Iranian bias at PNN and its predecessor, VOA's Persian Service, have, of course, not increased the confidence of Members of Congress, who appropriate the funding for

15. J. Michael Waller, "What Is Wrong at VOA? Iranian Revolutionary Guard Defends VOA against Critic," November 1, 2010, at <http://voapnnwatchdog.blogspot.com/search?q=waller> (December 28, 2011).

16. Fakhravar, "Is America's Overseas Broadcasting Undermining our National Interest and the Fight Against Tyrannical Regimes?" pp. 2-3.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

18. Voice of America, Persian News Network, "Poll," January 3, 2012. Google translation from Farsi.

U.S. international broadcasting. In 2007, frustration with PNN's lack of accountability and transparency led Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) to demand the translation of Persian-language broadcasts by Voice of America and Radio Farda. In order to force release of the documents, Senator Coburn, for months, placed a hold on the confirmation of President George W. Bush's nominated Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, James Glassman, who served as chairman of the BBG when the broadcasts took place. Not much has changed. In March 2010, a group of 70 Members of Congress, led by Representative Franks, wrote to President Obama to point out that things are not changing.¹⁹

The management of Voice of America is obviously aware of the problems detailed by the Members of Congress, as indicated by VOA's director, David Ensor, engaging the entire management team in improving performance. There continues to be much room for improvement. An internal performance review of PNN by BBG investigators, dated May 12, 2011, puts a favorable spin on attempts to update and improve the network.²⁰ Still, the report speaks of a lack of technical professionalism; overreliance on interviews often with the same group of Persian speakers; and a lack of variety in programming about American values and American life. American perspectives tend to be lacking in

discussions of policy issues, states the report, even though interviews with American officials may be tagged on in separate recorded interviews. As one of the report's outside evaluators noted in reference to the TV talk show *Straight Talk*, "The program, after all, is based in Washington, and apart from (by definition) being Iran-centric, should represent a view of America for Iranian audiences, too."²¹ It is stunning that the obvious needs to be stated.

Reaching an Audience

As recently as 2010, PNN was the leading international broadcaster in Iran, with an estimated audience of nearly 20 percent of the adult population. PNN's audience share, however has been dropping like a stone. According to a review published in May of PNN by InterMedia, the Washington-based audience research firm whose data for years have formed the basis of BBG broadcast strategy, "the combined weekly audience of VOA across radio, TV and internet, declined from 20.1 percent to 6.5 percent," over the course of a year. Meanwhile, "the weekly audience of VOA PNN TV went from 19.6 percent to 6.1 percent."²² It is worth noting that PNN radio remained stable over the same period. InterMedia, which tries to put a positive spin on this precipitous decline, cites as possible factors: satellite delivery and Iranian jamming (PNN TV

was forced off Eutelsat's HOT BIRD satellites, the most popular in Iran); significantly increased competition from both external and internal television channels; programming and scheduling changes; and the use of more rigorous survey methodology.

According to the BBG itself, the precipitous decline is due to effective countermeasures by the Iranian government. That may be true, but it is only part of the issue. Quality and credibility are clearly important issues. As noted, Iranian websites follow events at PNN with keen interest, and news spreads quickly in political circles. Iranians surely know that PNN is rife with internal turmoil.

According to recent and reliable survey data, the most successful foreign news broadcaster to Iran is BBC Persian—not PNN.²³ Some estimates even put BBC Persian's viewership at twice that of PNN. This, despite the fact that BBC Persian has only been on the air since 2008. Furthermore, "the reach of BBC Persian TV has nearly doubled in Iran—rising by 94 percent from 3.1 million in 2009 to 6.0 million—despite an intensifying campaign of censorship and intimidation by the Iranian authorities."²⁴ Unlike PNN, BBC Persian is not run as a government agency; it functions as an independent agency that is government funded. BBC Persian fields many more on-site journalists than does PNN, which gives it news coverage with more accuracy and vitality.

19. Amir A. Fakhraivar, "A Letter Signed by Seventy Members of Congress Against VOA Persian to President Obama," March 26, 2010, at <http://voapnnwatchdog.blogspot.com/2010/03/70-congress-members-sign-letter-to.html> (February 6, 2012).

20. Broadcasting Board of Governors, *Performance Review: Persian New Network, 2011*, May 2011, Washington, DC.

21. Broadcasting Board of Governors, "PNN Program Analysis," May 12, 2011, p. 6.

22. InterMedia, "VOA Persian Service Review," May 12, 2011.

23. *Ibid.*

24. News release, "Audiences Double in Iran, Despite Increase in Censorship Intimidation," BBC, February 29, 2012, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2012/bbc-persian-doubles-audience.html> (February 29, 2012).

Additional competition to PNN is brought on by dozens of Iranian state-sponsored television stations, which influence millions of Iranians despite the Iranian programs' clear ideological bias.

PNN Radio. In line with existing BBG strategy, shortwave radio broadcasts have been sacrificed at PNN in favor of satellite television, Internet, and a surrogate broadcaster (Radio Farda). Just one hour of Farsi radio programming remains on PNN, despite the fact that shortwave broadcasting is the medium least sensitive to Iranian government jamming and censorship, and, it should be noted, despite the fact that radio remains a viable medium for reaching Iranians. According to InterMedia, 33 percent of Iranians in 2011 reported listening to radio for entertainment and news. (This compares to 99 percent for television, 37 percent for newspaper, and 22 percent for Internet).²⁵ Most of the assets of VOA's Persian radio service, however, have been transferred to Radio Farda (which is run by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich). As noted in the 2009 OIG report, "VOA does not appear to have a clearly delineated mission for Persian-language radio as part of PNN or to have engaged in strategic thinking regarding its role."²⁶

PNN Internet. The BBG has hitched most of its strategic planning and hopes to the Internet in the new strategic plan adopted by the BBG

is its meeting on October 13, 2011.²⁷ Websites have fairly low overhead compared with broadcast media, and in tight budgetary times this factor is a clear allure. Yet, there are problems with this strategy. While 22 percent of Iranians report using the Internet, a number that has been trending upwards over the past five years, the increase in traffic has not translated into more hits for VOA's websites; in fact, quite the reverse. According to the 2009 OIG report, while PNN's website reported 6 million hits in December 2007, this was down to 3 million in January 2008, and in November 2008, there were only 2 million.²⁸ According to InterMedia, in 2011, just 2 percent of Iranian Internet users pay weekly visits to the PNN website, less than half a million people.

The Iranian targeting of the Internet is well documented. In fact, the Iranian Cyber Army (created after the June 2009 demonstrations) has on several occasions hacked VOA websites. Controlling cyberspace is one of Tehran's highest priorities and its sophistication is considerable. Of the 37 countries examined by Freedom House in its "Freedom on the Net 2011" index, Iran ranked dead last, allowing its citizens the least amount of Internet access and freedom to express themselves.²⁹

The BBG has in turn tasked its anti-censorship office under Director Ken Berman to find ways around the cyber-censorship by Iran, China, and

other countries controlled by authoritarian regimes. Last year, Congress gave the BBG \$10 million for this purpose.³⁰ It is a cat and mouse game, which Iran at present seems to be winning—and which is why the PNN website can currently at best be a complement to the broadcasting components of PNN.

How the U.S. Can Reach Iran

PNN presents a complex portrait: On the one hand, its contribution has undeniable importance in support of U.S. foreign policy and U.S. national interests. On the other, the actual implementation of PNN's mandate is clearly flawed. Communication difficulties, internal culture, and status as part of a government agency have hindered its ability to achieve its full potential and to provide a meaningful and fulfilling professional environment for its employees, both Iranian and American. To make PNN an effective part of a comprehensive U.S. strategy toward Iran, the BBG should:

- **Restructure the PNN workplace.** Professional management training for supervisors is a must, as is increased vertical communication within the network and greater transparency in hiring and promotion.
- **Improve the hiring process** to make sure that Persian-language and English-language capabilities

25. InterMedia, "VOA Persian Service Review," May 12, 2011.

26. U.S. State Department and BBG Office of Inspector General, "Report of Inspection," p. 15.

27. Broadcasting Board of Governors, "Impact Through Innovation and Integration: BBG Strategic Plan 2012-2016," at http://media.voanews.com/documents/StrategicPlanNarrative_2012-20161.pdf (February 6, 2012).

28. U.S. State Department and BBG Office of Inspector General, "Report of Inspection," p. 23.

29. Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2011," pp. 187-194.

30. Helle Dale and Jessica Zuckerman, "U.S. Must Improve Internet Freedom Outreach Effort," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3303, June 28, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/06/freedom-of-speech-on-the-internet-us-must-improve-outreach-effort>.

exist at all levels of production and management.

- **Write new guidelines applying to contract employees** to ensure equitable treatment and accountability for all.
- **Create a board of Farsi-speaking advisers** whose purpose it will be to monitor broadcasts and provide feedback on PNN program content.
- **Demand that PNN editors and producers use the resources of U.S. taxpayers to provide more professional, diverse, and technologically proficient programming**, anchored in American values and aligned with U.S. national interests.

Congress should:

- **Exercise its power of oversight** and request that the Foreign Relations Committees in the House and Senate hold regular hearings on issues relating to U.S. international broadcasting.

The Obama Administration needs a consistent policy that supports the human rights and democratic aspirations of Iranians—and U.S. international broadcasting has a major part to play in this context. When the content of U.S. international broadcasting takes an anti-American or pro-Tehran slant, it can be confusing for Iranian audiences and democracy activists who are looking for support from the outside world, especially from the United States. It is incumbent on the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the leadership of Voice of America to implement a series of reforms to improve the performance and personnel morale at PNN. An essential part of the very mission of Voice of America depends on it.

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