

Beyond the Electronic Curtain

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Abstract

The following compares the challenges of Iranians to that of the citizens of the Soviet Union a few short decades ago in overcoming the barriers that keep them from exchanging information with the free world and contributing to the advancement of global civilization. It also addresses the current and future role of the Voice of America in providing Iranians with an alternative means of establishing and maintaining a constructive dialogue on the ideals of the Iranian people.

Biography

Mr. Asgard is a career Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State. In February of 2011, he assumed the office of Director of the Voice of America's Persian News Network. VOA began broadcasting to Iran as the VOA Persian Service in 1942, and now provides the U.S. government's primary communications channel to Iran. Prior to joining VOA, Mr. Asgard served as Political Advisor to the Commanding General of U.S. Central Command, first for General David Petraeus and later for General James Mattis. Before CENTCOM, Mr. Asgard served as Director of the Iran Regional Presence Office in Dubai, the U.S. government's primary field operation concerning Iran.

Prior to IRPO-Dubai, Mr. Asgard served as Deputy Political Counsellor in Riyadh, Economic/Commercial Officer in Kabul, Political/Economic Officer in the UAE, and as a Consular Officer in Turkey. Mr. Asgard has also served domestically as an International Affairs Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and as Desk Officer for Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. He has received the 2007 Secretary's Award for Public Outreach, the 2003 Charles Cobb Award for Trade Promotion, and several Superior and Meritorious Honour Awards. Prior to joining the Foreign Service, Mr. Asgard practiced law in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He received his Juris Doctor degree from Tulane University, his Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Pennsylvania, and his Bachelor's degree from Temple University. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Beyond the Electronic Curtain

Just over two decades ago, a large part of the world lived behind an Iron Curtain. The Soviet Union, in its effort to shield its citizens from outside influences, deployed a massive internal security apparatus, all available surveillance technology, and imposed severe limitations on movement, speech, press, assembly, and association. Eventually, after decades of such repression, the most evocative symbol of the Iron Curtain - the Berlin Wall - came down at the hands of free peoples on both sides of the barrier.

The Soviet leadership finally realized that cutting off its people from the world to secure total political control had eventually resulted in the intellectual, political, and economic stagnation of its society. Ultimately, the wall fell with Soviet acquiescence, and perhaps imperfect but far freer societies took root in Russia and much of the rest of the former Soviet Union. If the Islamic Republic of Iran learns from this example, it may yet reverse its slide towards totalitarianism. Yes

Iranians have never enjoyed free access to information during the Islamic Republic period, but the severity of Islamic Republic limits on its people's discourse has reached unprecedented levels today - and it only threatens to get worse. This month's Freedom House ranking of the IRI as last in Internet freedom among the 37 countries assessed is only the latest in a long record of repression of Iranian society.²⁰

Staggered by the massive post-election protests of 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran's government (IRIG) has now accelerated completion of its own formidable barrier between its people and the outside world - an "electronic curtain" - no less suffocating than the Iron Curtain of the last century.²¹ Previewing its future intentions, earlier this month the IRIG announced its plan to develop a "Halal" Internet, which if realized would essentially seal off Iranians from Internet contact with the rest of the world. Seeing the vibrancy and creativity of one of the world's most intellectually prolific cultures under such bondage is not merely a violation of international human rights standards, but represents a tragic affront to the advance of world civilization.

One primary target of the IRIG's electronic curtain has been the Voice of America Persian Service. Since 1942, Voice of America has been a credible source of news and information to audiences throughout the world, including Iran. Today, VOA Persian plays a more critical role than ever. Without diplomatic, commercial, academic, security, or touristic ties between the US and Iran, VOA Persian (and its sister broadcaster Radio Farda) have become the primary communication channels between the U.S. and Iran. At VOA Persian, we are committed to engaging all the Iranian people with accurate, trustworthy, and comprehensive news and other programming. We deal in truth and dialogue, not propaganda, and remain committed to reaching our audience in Iran.

But moving VOA Persian forward to realize its potential will require substantial change. While the IRIG's policies certainly complicate matters, no amount of outside interference absolves us of our duty to undertake a sober and comprehensive assessment of our situation and use courage and ingenuity to advance in our mission. In outlining the way forward, it is important to first describe the environment within which we have operated in recent years.

For some time the pressure-laden political climate of US-Iran relations, as well as the contentious and fractious nature of Iranian exile politics has driven VOA Persian towards agenda-laden and defensive programming coverage, guest selection, and editorial policy. Such outside influences have at times also created a politically-charged working environment impacting VOA Persian's internal journalistic practice and editorial integrity.

Correcting this situation will require, among other steps, strict application of the core values of journalism and the VOA Charter – the search for and broadcasting of the truth. In addition, we believe that the Iranian people are searching for truth, not propaganda, and not more grim rehashing of their condition. Where the truth is contested, VOA's Persian News Network (Persian News Network (PNN)) will offer a platform for civic discourse

²⁰ The IRI ranked 187th out of 199 nations in Press Freedom according to Freedom House's 2010 report on Global Press Freedom; was designated as "Not Free" by Freedom House's 2011 Freedom in the World report; and ranked 171st out of 179 nations in Economic Freedom according to the Heritage Foundation's 2010 report on Global Economic Freedom.

²¹ Elements of this barrier include uplink jamming (jamming of satellite signals at their satellite source), downlink jamming (jamming of receiving satellite dishes at ground level), aggressive monitoring of all online communications, Internet filtering and denial of service, intimidation of bloggers and online activists, government-sponsored hacking, and other technical, legislative, judicial, and extra-judicial methods aimed at curtailing free expression and communication both within Iran and between Iranians and the outside world.

(perhaps at times adversarial, but always civil) from which our viewership may draw their own conclusions over the merits of contrasting positions.

In addition, the quality and scope of our programming needs to be upgraded substantially. Iranian viewers now have a range of viewing options to choose from, including entertainment and diverse IRIB programming. To compete, our programs and online presence must not only improve in quality, they must also become more relevant to our audience inside Iran. Our most popular show, Parazit, has established strong audience rapport and developed an engaging style attractive to a broad Iranian audience. More quality programs focused on material relevant to our audience can build on this success. Upgraded versions of existing programs, and completely new program offerings will be rolled out this summer.

Enhancing the timeliness and feel of our news coverage will require establishing a forward positioned bureau office, ideally in Tehran, but at least in the immediate region of Iran. To add to the depth of our programming, we are setting up a research team to provide textured background and analysis. Finally, to bring VOA Persian into the digital age of journalism, we are establishing a social media team to connect with the sizable online audience inside Iran. Taken together, these steps and many others will lead to the fresh, relevant, and incisive programming our audience deserves.

Such broadcasts may well challenge the monopoly of information within a closed society like today's IRI, but it bears mention that the IRIG does not object to satellite broadcasting for communication in general. In fact, the IRIG makes extensive use of satellite broadcasting itself, currently operating 48 channels to communicate in English, Turkish, Arabic, and other languages with the world. Unfortunately, the Iranian government is unwilling to allow its people free access to satellite broadcasts from outside public and private international broadcasters. If the IRIG is so confident in the power of its culture and ideas that it runs 48 separate television broadcast channels to promulgate them to global and regional audiences, why is it unwilling to also allow its own population access to outside culture and ideas?

We at VOA Persian hope that the IRIG will soon realize that isolating Iran from the rest of the world will eventually lead to the same stagnation - intellectually, politically, economically, and culturally - that led to the downfall of the USSR. If this isolation ends, the world would be greatly enriched through more open communication with Iran. A modest first step in this regard would be to allow a VOA bureau office in Tehran. Another would be to engage in a true global dialogue by ceasing the illegal practice of jamming satellite broadcasts. Deriving benefits from global legal and technological infrastructures - most saliently in this case global communications technology - while refusing to adhere to globally agreed-upon norms of conduct does not befit a nation purporting to act as a leader within the region or the Muslim world.

It is still not too late to take down the electronic curtain, particularly at this time when dramatic change is sweeping the region, and to finally allow the Iranian people the freedom to engage their world. We at VOA stand ready to support the dialogue.