



Iran's media battleground

Washington's plan to expand Farsi-language TV and radio broadcasts may fuel the media equivalent of an arms race

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It may all seem rather insignificant but Condoleeza Rice's plan to increase funding for a range of new "public diplomacy" activities targeting Iran is a fascinating development in the ongoing struggle between Washington and Tehran.

The new expenditure reportedly includes \$50m to increase US government TV and radio broadcasts into Iran; \$5m for student exchange and scholarship programmes; \$5m to support non-government TV, radio and websites; and \$15m for civil society groups.

Such an increase is the equivalent of about a quarter of the entire annual budget of the BBC World Service - and it signals a major expansion of such activities.

The announcement does not come as a total surprise. In recent years, broadcasting has become a key element of Washington's policy towards Iran. In December 2002, the US-funded Radio Farda (meaning "Tomorrow") began regular broadcasts in Farsi (the majority language in Iran) on short-wave, medium-wave and satellite.

Radio Farda is a classic example of what is known as "public diplomacy" - the activity by which governments seek to communicate and engage with foreign citizens. Replacing the old Voice of America Farsi service, the new 24-hour service has been broadcasting a blend of music and news aimed at Iranians under the age of 30. With an opening broadcast penned by President George Bush, the service has clearly had high-level backing from the outset.

Although radio has traditionally been the US public diplomacy tool of choice, television has also had a role. In 2003, the US government began weekly satellite broadcasts of a half-hour current affairs programme in Farsi called News and Views. The broadcast was reportedly launched in response to student demonstrations that summer.

In a 2003 press statement announcing the launch of the broadcast, Kenneth Tomlinson, the chairman of the US Broadcasting Board of Governors, said that "by reporting what's happening in Iran today, we can help further the struggle for freedom and self-determination in Iran".

Whether or not one believes such broadcasts might genuinely facilitate "regime change" from within - apparently Washington's favoured option - they are clearly being taken seriously by the State Department.

As part of the new initiative, there are even signs that US policymakers will begin funding some of the many independent Iranian exile TV stations based in Los Angeles, something Congress has previously blocked.

All this is evidence of an innovative battle being fought by Washington and Tehran over the international airwaves. Iran, for its part, has not sat back and let the Voice of America and its colleagues do as they please. Much as the Soviet Union sought to do during the Cold War, Iran has used jamming technology, reportedly purchased from Cuba (another key broadcast target for Washington), to prevent Iranians tuning in to the American broadcasts.

At the same time, the Iranian government has been on the offensive. For example, despite the best efforts of the Coalition Provisional Authority to dominate the "information environment" in 2003 post-war Iraq, Iran worked hard to establish an influential media presence there.

The Tehran government made good use of its geographical advantage over rival broadcasters, and links with Iraqi shi'ite groups, to get in on the act very early. Iran's chief success was the launch of its terrestrial Arabic-language television station al-Alam (meaning "The World").

Available 24 hours a day via satellite in much of Europe, the Middle East and Asia, al-Alam was broadcast from a powerful transmitter 150km from Baghdad, just inside the Iranian border, which, at the time, made it the only foreign television channel receivable inside Iraq without a satellite dish.

As Ms Rice moves to expand US public diplomacy activities into Iran, we may well see - or hear - the broadcasting equivalent of an arms race. Extra transmissions from Washington or Los Angeles targeting Tehran may be matched by equivalents emanating from Tehran targeting Baghdad and Kabul.

Things may also get increasingly technical. The US military has a number of large transport aeroplanes - codenamed Commando Solo - capable of broadcasting TV and radio signals over long distances. Commando Solo, flying at a height of 20,000 feet, has a broadcast range of about 170 miles, beyond which communications reception deteriorates. But a Gulfstream or Global Hawk jet flying at a height of 60,000 feet would have a broadcast range of 300 miles - enough to reach traditional television sets in the Iranian capital from a plane flying inside Iraq.

In a world where the power to influence has genuine and serious political implications, expect to see the old enemies, America and Iran, continuing to apply their invention and imagination to outwit each other in the enduring battle for hearts and minds.

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