

The United States Congress

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Is America's Overseas Broadcasting Undermining our National Interest and the Fight against Tyrannical Regimes?

April 6, 2011

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Good Afternoon honorable members of congress, Ladies and Gentlemen;

I am honored and delighted to be among members of House Foreign Relations Committee and distinguished guests who are testifying today. My name is Amir Abbas Fakhravar, a writer, former political prisoner and the secretary general of the Confederation of Iranian Student (CIS) with over 8000 members inside and outside of Iran. CIS was recognized by the Congressional Research Service as one of the most important Iranian opposition groups since 2009 until now.

In 1992, I was seventeen when I was first arrested for a speech in which I criticized the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. For the next fourteen years I was in and out of prison while I was trying to finish my studies in medical school and later law school. In all, I spent over five years in different prisons, eight consecutive months of which was in solitary confinement.

In 2005, I escaped prison and so I had to live underground for months before I left Iran. During that time, I had a chance to watch VOA TV and listen to Radio Farda. After receiving the news all my life from the propaganda machine of the Islamic Republic, I was excited to finally watch a Western news source, specially an American one. I expected news that was pro democracy, pro freedom and pro US policies. To my surprise, there was a clear anti-American tone in some of the programs especially those that covered the news in Iraq and Afghanistan.

VOA and Radio Farda both contacted me in those days and I had a couple of interviews with both of them. I openly expressed my pro-Western and pro-American views and my opposition to the totalitarian and incorrigible nature of the Islamic Republic. My following interview was canceled and instead, I saw two members of Tahkime Vahdat, a government sponsored student organization being interviewed on that program.

When I came to the United States in May 2006, and I found out that VOA/PNN and Radio Farda were paid for by U.S. tax dollars, I knew something was not right in these organizations.

Senator Tom Coburn invited me to testify before the Senate Homeland Security Committee on July 20, 2006. The subject was the nuclear impasse of the Islamic Republic, but with Senator Coburn's help I was able to also put a spot light on VOA PNN and Radio Farda. In my testimony at the time, I said, "I do not think that the American taxpayers are happy to see their money being used for propaganda against the United States." "With the so-called balanced view of these two media, they have really caused nothing but confusion among Iranians." Needless to say that CIS and myself were boycotted from VOA/PNN and Radio Farda for more than four years. I was personally criticized and discredited on air on several

occasions. CIS and Iranian Freedom Institute conducted a thorough research into the affairs of VOA/PNN and Radio Farda from 2006 to 2008. This research included close monitoring of their programming, confidential interviews with employees who were willing to talk and a study in the background of employees. The results were submitted to Senator Coburn and BBG. For two years Senator Coburn and a team of his staff followed VOA/PNN's actions. As a result the entire management of Persian Service was investigated by Inspector General and the management at VOA PNN was removed in Sept. 2008. Even though this removal took place, nothing really changed because the new management team was simply a reshuffling of existing employees.

On February 23, 2010, after one of our briefings to members of congress, congressman Trent Franks wrote a letter to President Obama with 69 signatures of members of congress asking VOA PNN programs to be reviewed. Weeks later, the entire management of Persian service at VOA was removed in May 2010; however the void of management made matters even worse.

From 2006 to 2010, the managers of VOA/PNN started expanding the programs from 2 hours to 8 hours without any real plans or strategies only to create generous expense accounts and positions for their family members and friends. The number of employees grew threefold to over 200 people. The low quality of the added programming forced them to cut them back to a total of four hours again in November 2010. Curiously, not one employee was laid off. As a result of these low quality programs and its unprofessional staff, VOA/PNN lost much of its audience and Iranians turned to more reliable sources such as BBC Farsi.

In the early part of 2010, new members of Broadcasting Board of Governors were appointed by President Obama to solve the issues and improve the situation. By the middle of the year they were all confirmed by the Senate and Governor Enders Wimbush, who had a valuable management experience in Radio Free Europe, started to investigate the root of the problem in the Persian Service. CIS had several meetings with Governor Wimbush, executive directors and staff members of the BBG, and many Congressmen and Senators including members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Chairman Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R), Congressman Ed Royce (R), Congressman Ted Poe (R) and Congressman Ted Deutch (D). When we shared our information on VOA with all of them, we all reached the conclusion that changing the management in and of itself is not the answer but the following problems should be addressed.

1. Not following the BBG and VOA mission by VOA Persian and Radio Farda. The BBG , VOA and Radio Farda's mission statement reads *"To promote freedom and democracy and to enhance understanding through multimedia communication of accurate, objective, and balanced news, information, and other programming about America and the world to audiences overseas."* however when you go to VOA Persian website you will see that the mission has been reduced to *"Our ONLY duty is to report the news!"*

2. Broadcasting Anti-American messages regularly without balance

- August 2, 2007, News and Views, Opposing USA when reporting about ACAN Conference and Korean Hostage
- August 9, 2007, News and Views, Setareh Derakhshesh, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and atomic Bomb, Report opposing USA
- May 8, 9, 10, 2007, Bombing in Iraq and reporting only the negative aspects and insinuating the mistake of the US war in Iraq

- August 21, 2007, Protest opposing Presidents Bush's trip to Canada and tarnishing the President with video and Picture
- March 8, 2007, Trip with President Bush on Air Force One to South America and promoting Hugo Chavez against Bush
- November 6, 2007, Hooshmand Mirfakhraie, Report against USA about atomic bomb and war in Korea
- November 2, 2007, Setareh Derakhshesh, the host and a reporter exchange comments that an atomic bomb is only something an American is capable of doing, and they quote a World War era US fighter jet pilot that said killing the Japanese during Hiroshima was a duty, and both conclude with cynical comments
- December 6, 2010, The night before one of the most important protest for the Green Movement, Setareh Derakhshesh interviews Anti-American Marxist-Stalinist, their dialogue is an understanding that implies the green movement is nothing short of a bunch of thugs in the street with no direction and created by the hand of "American Imperialism!"

3. Wasting money for unnecessary traveling and personal matters.

4. Nepotism. You can find many family members and friends with little or no journalism background among the personnel.

5. Favoritism

6. Lack of background check. Ahmad Batebi, was hired at VOA/PNN with a false resume. This person was given a special cell phone by the Islamic Republic's Intelligence service so he could provide critical information to them and receive direction from them. Mana Rabeei, another VOA employee was previously working for Press TV, the official English TV of the Islamic Republic, and was [the producer of a program praising the Basiji forces that was aired three days after Neda was killed](#). No wonder on March 17, 2010, she asked Congressman Ed Royce "What right did the congress have to sanction the Revolutionary Guards?! They protect the Iranian People and the country!"

7. Lack of oversight and supervision

8. Misusing the power of media to support the political views of its employees

9. Boycotting and even slandering people they don't agree with.

10. Inadequate or late coverage of protests in Iran and complete lack of support for the freedom fighters. Lack of coverage of the green movement, on June 20, 2009, the video of Neda Agha Sultan's brutal murder was captured by a cell phone camera circulated around the world in a matter of minutes, however VOA PNN with the objection of Ali Sadjadi, (Chief news Editor) chose not to broadcast the video for three days allegedly because the video was not credible. Another example, on February 14, 2011 when after a long period of silence, Iranians took to the streets once again to show the world that the green movement was still alive. Two young men were killed by the regime, PNN instead continued with their biography of Jennifer Lopez and even in the news segment reported these protests as the eighth or ninth new item.

11. Not supporting and criticizing the US policy. Both VOA/PNN and Radio Farda only invite guests who are opposed to sanctions. Although there have been a great deal of reports on the success of the sanctions, they concentrate on comments by Ahmadinejad and others that make them seem completely ineffective, beneficial only to the Revolutionary Guard or harmful to the Iranian people. For example Even though the proposal of oil sanctions by some of the most influential opposition groups was

discussed in the U.S. congress and appears in the U.S. Congressional Reports, both VOA Persian and Radio Farda refused to even mention this important development.

With regards to the Cuban president's resignation, on February 19, 2008, News & Views allocated 12 minutes, in two separate segments, introducing Fidel Castro as a national, international hero, as well as a warrior against the Western powers. It further elaborated for nearly 50 years; Castro provided happiness, strength, and national health care, which also used his powers to establish 10,000 schools to eliminate illiteracy in the nation. Moreover, it emphasized the Cuban health care, and social security systems as one of the best in the world. As an example, the reporting stated that Castro has met with major world leaders, and later showed clips of Castro meeting with Hugo Chavez, Moamar Qadafi, and Mohammad Khatami of Iran. The question that arises is, are these really "major" world figures?

12. Acting as a political party that shores up those with similar point of views and tries to weaken others. Former elements of the Islamic Republic, such as reformists, and known lobbyists for the Islamic Republic have dominated the political programs of VOA Persian and Radio Farda since 2006. They have appeared weekly, sometimes daily and have portrayed the Green Movement as a reform movement or a civil right movement only and have insisted that the people of Iran strongly oppose regime change.

13. Misusing VOA to support their favored political parties during the US and [European](#) elections.

14. Promoting personal business of employees on air with taxpayer's money.

15. Undermining and demonizing the United States Army. [Abjeez music video called ; Demokracy](#)

The host, Luna Shad, April 22, 2007, devotes 35 minutes of air time to an anti-American band that had produced a CD, containing a song that mocks the U.S. troops, and declares them occupiers. The host actively campaigns on-air for the audience to purchase the CD and to support the band.

Solutions:

1. Watchdog Committee. This committee must operate under the BBG itself and must consist of people who speak English and Persian fluently, and are loyal to the United States and the BBG mission. This is a very easy and inexpensive solution and the mere presence of such a committee will prevent any infractions by the VOA and Radio Farda personnel.

2. Rehiring the Employees, especially those who were hired during the Corruption years (2005-2011). A thorough background check, a verification of the personnel's educational and professional backgrounds listed on their resumes, and a removal of unnecessary and unqualified staff.

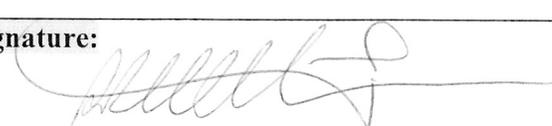
3. Having a strong management team who can fully understand Farsi and English with a proven record of loyalty to USA and BBG's mission. Presently, Ramin Asgard who has the above qualifications has been appointed as the director of VOA/PNN. He must be able to create such a management team and Congress must watch this cleanup process closely. The same must be done for Radio Farda.

The Islamic Republic still remains the biggest foreign policy challenge of the United States. Diplomatic efforts have failed. The people of Iran have spoken loud and clear. They want a secular and democratic government. VOA/PNN and Radio Farda are two powerful yet so far neglected tools that can effectively tackle this challenge alongside oil sanctions. We must work to strengthen both before the only choices left are military action or learning to live with a nuclear Islamic Republic and its consequences.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

“TRUTH IN TESTIMONY” DISCLOSURE FORM

Clause 2(g) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives and the Rules of the Committee require the disclosure of the following information. A copy of this form should be attached to your written testimony and will be made publicly available in electronic format, per House Rules.

1. Name: Amir Abbas Fakhravar	2. Organization or organizations you are representing: CONFEDERATION OF IRANIAN STUDENTS
3. Date of Committee hearing: April 6, 2011	
4. Have <u>you</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	5. Have any of the <u>organizations you are representing</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
6. If you answered yes to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets. 	
7. Signature: 	

Please attach a copy of this form to your written testimony.