

April 4, 2008

Stephen Hadley
National Security Advisor
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Hadley,

In 2006, I chaired a hearing on Iran's nuclear program and U.S. policy options for confronting the regime. At the hearing, we discussed the three choices we have for dealing with this terrorist regime: appeasement, military intervention, or democracy promotion. I agree with most people that appeasing Iran's mullahs would be a disaster to international security and is not an option. Military intervention is certainly unattractive for a host of reasons and should only be used as a very last resort when all else has failed. The U.S. and the rest of the free world should be encouraging democratic voices within Iran that seek institutional reforms that make the government accountable to the good people of Iran.

Each of the witnesses at our hearing who discussed U.S. democracy promotion to Iran testified that the main public diplomacy tools, television and radio broadcasts, were ineffective and many times counterproductive to U.S. policy interests. As a result, we initiated an oversight investigation of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). As you know, the BBG is the independent agency that oversees U.S. international broadcasting including Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

The information we uncovered about VOA Persian TV and Radio Farda, satellite television and radio broadcasts to Iran, is disturbing and was corroborated by internal analysis that you commissioned in 2006 through the Iran Steering Group. This study of six months' content of U.S. broadcasting to Iran was conducted by a Farsi speaking analyst studying Iran for the Government.

The study concluded that U.S. broadcasts to Iran "fall short of realizing their stated mission and mandate." Even more troubling, the study illustrates how VOA Persian TV "routinely invites guests who defend the Islamic Republic's version of the issues, [but] fails to maintain a balance by inviting informed guests who represent another perspective on the same issue."

Our oversight investigation reached three main conclusions:

(1) Transparency: The American people have no way to know what broadcast content they are underwriting unless they speak Farsi. Studies have to be commissioned just to

find out what we're broadcasting, and then those studies are not made public. Even more alarming, beyond the American people, not even the management at VOA or BBG *responsible* for overseeing the content are not able to do so because they are not fluent in Farsi. This is not real oversight. What's more, transparency has the added effect of not only retrospective accountability, but deterrence in the planning of programming. If VOA reporters knew that their programs would be translated and scrutinized by the BBG, Congress, the State Department, the CIA, the Department of Defense, and other critical national security agencies, as well as the American people and public watchdog groups, they'd likely be more consistent with U.S. policy.

(2) Accountability: BBG management structure lacks accountability. Each member of the Board is solely responsible for a certain geographical region or type of broadcasting and members generally have an unwritten, mutual non-interference policy, meaning that Board members do not exercise any sort of oversight, influence or even attention on the areas of responsibility for other Board members. As such, Board members report to no one, not even each other, with respect to the content and operations of their areas of responsibility. Management structures lead to individual broadcast services in individual regions operating autonomously without any oversight from above or coordination across similar services in neighboring or similar regions. For more on this, see the attached analysis from a 2006 Booz Allen Hamilton study before it was censored by the BBG to remove all criticism of the Board.

(3) No Guidance and Coordination from Key Policy-Making Agencies (State, Defense, Homeland Security, National Security Council, etc): As you know, according to U.S. law¹, taxpayer funded international broadcasting must "include a clear and effective presentation of the policies of the US government and responsible discussion and opinion on those policies." While Radio Farda, recently under new management, appears to have made significant improvements, VOA continues to produce content that violates this principle. In fact, it would be impossible to comply with the law because there is no coordinated, coherent, and consistent message about U.S. policy being communicated to BBG services, either generally (pro-U.S., pro-democracy and pro-freedom), or specific to regions or crises (such as the War on Terror, or the Middle East). Decisions are made on the fly, on the ground, and by unaccountable and sometimes even very biased and negative producers and reporters.

The lack of transparency, accountability, and guidance at the BBG has led to counterproductive broadcasts and misguided policies. For example, on December 4th, 2007, VOA Persian TV coverage of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report on Iran's nuclear program included a pre-taped interview with a well-known anti-U.S. professor from Tehran University, Sadegh Ziba Kalam. According to Iran analysts, Professor Kalam has a long history of being an apologist for the regime. The VOA interviewer editorialized in the question by saying,

Now that it is *proven Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons* programs since 2003, is it still justified to seek a third round of sanctions?

¹ 22 USC 6202(b)

In response, the professor defended the position of the Islamic Republic—that sanctions were not justified. Knowing the position of the interviewee, the reporter paved the way for this entire segment of VOA Persian TV to undermine U.S. policy on Iran. There was no rebuttal, challenge, or “effective presentation of the policies of the U.S. government” presented in the segment as required by law.

The next day, VOA again undermined U.S. policy by devoting an entire news article to repeat the claims made by Iran’s President Ahmadinejad that the NIE proved Iran was victorious over the United States². He declared the report substantiates the regime’s denial of developing nuclear weapon capabilities. VOA failed to rebut these claims with informed, U.S. viewpoints or quotes from the NIE, such as the acknowledgement that Iran is currently enriching uranium, a necessary step towards nuclear weaponization. A few months prior, VOA came under scrutiny for similar reports that failed to balance inflammatory statements made at the United Nations by representatives of the Burmese and Iranian regimes.³

More recently, on March 10th, 2008, VOA issued an article, “Sanctions Often Fail to Hit Foreign Policy Targets.” The article was devoted entirely to a hostile viewpoint on U.S. sanctions policy which is used to help apply pressure to regimes such as Iran, Burma, and Cuba.

When these types of problems have been brought to the attention of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the typical response is denial or a defense of the policy or content. For example, we recently shared concerns about VOA’s “terrorists are freedom fighters” policy with the current chairman of the BBG, James Glassman. Mr. Glassman did not consider this to be a serious problem. In an internet post made in January on the official VOA News blog⁴, Don Benson, the VOA Central News Division editor, declared the official policy of VOA to ban the label “terrorists” when VOA reporters refer to groups officially designated as terrorists by the U.S. government. Mr. Benson explained the policy by stating,

We try to keep in mind that one person's "terrorist" is another person's "freedom fighter," and that there often are political implications in how governments distinguish one group from another.

We have also spoken with members of the BBG concerning the anti-U.S. bias inherent in much of the content broadcast to Iran, and have been told that VOA purposely gives a platform to the propaganda of the regime in order to “let the Iranians decide for themselves.” As most U.S. public diplomacy experts believe, the regime in Iran strictly controls all indigenous media and so has plenty of platforms from which to attack the U.S., defend Iran’s horrendous human rights record support of terrorism, and plan to “wipe Israel off the map.” The U.S. taxpayers should not subsidize content presenting a balance between the truth and the regime’s malicious propaganda. U.S. broadcasts should be the balance to the propaganda being broadcast by the regime and others.

² “Iranian President Claims Victory in Nuclear Dispute,” by Sonja Pace, *Voice of America*, 5 December 2007

³ “Voice of America? Or Megaphone for Iran and the Burmese Junta?,” by Claudia Rosett, *Rosett Report*, 8 October 2007

⁴ <http://voanewsblog.blogspot.com/2008/01/terrorist-vs-rebel-who-decides-and-why.html>

Further, there is a serious lack of strategic planning at BBG. We have recently been told by several BBG whistleblowers that senior BBG staff, including the head of BBG Strategic Planning, proposed cutting broadcasts to the Balkans and Tibet weeks before both regions sunk into serious crises. According to these sources, BBG staff recommended cutting broadcasts to China by up to half and permitting the authorization of Radio Free Asia to expire without alerting Congress.

At a time when public diplomacy and broadcasting truth is most crucial to these regions, such planning is a disservice to the U.S. taxpayers who underwrite U.S. international broadcasting. While the BBG was figuring out how to convince Congress of this plan, only one of the current governors of the board objected. If it weren't for the crises that erupted in both regions, shortly after the cuts were recommended, the BBG would have most likely allowed the recommendation to be carried out.

Finally, the lack of whistleblower protections at the BBG is troubling. In an agency like the BBG that needs greater transparency and accountability, whistleblowers are essential in order to gauge the effectiveness of the agency. On March 8, 2008, after a series of VOA employees and outside observers expressed concern about counterproductive content, senior BBG and VOA officials held a staff meeting with VOA Persian TV in an attempt to silence further whistleblowers. Employees who have expressed concern before this meeting were already harassed and intimidated by VOA management.

After the meeting, VOA officials emailed the staff a summary of what was discussed. The message reinforced by the email illustrates Soviet-style intimidation used at VOA to silence whistleblowers. The following are excerpts from the email:

"If you disagree with any work that is being done at [VOA Persian TV], let's talk about it. Don't feed external criticism."

"Freedom of speech is a tricky issue. There are limits to free speech. You have the right to speak with elected officials and outside media but these comments need to be made in the public interest."

"Blogs that discuss our work are a symbol of our success. We enjoy freedom of speech in America. However, I will not stand for people at VOA who undermine our mission."

For these reasons, many believe we should reform the Broadcasting Board of Governors and U.S. international broadcasting. The first step is to appoint people to the Board who are qualified in strategic communications and are committed to transparency, accountability, and reforms. The following individuals meet these criterion and are excellent candidates for appointments to the Board :

Cliff May, President of the Foundation for Defense of Democracy which was founded shortly after 9/11 to engage in the war of ideas and to support the defense of democratic societies.

Scott Carpenter, director the Project Fikra at the Washington Institute that focuses on empowering Arab moderates and liberals in their struggles against extremism.

Enders Wimbush, Senior Vice President of the Hudson Institute, who has a proven track record in the "War of Ideas" while operating Radio Liberty during Cold War.

Another important step towards reforming the BBG is to publicly post English transcripts of the content we broadcast internationally. There have been commitments from members of the BBG and others in the Administration to bring this transparency to U.S. broadcasts to Iran. However, VOA Persian TV, citing budget constraints, will not post more than one hour of transcripts a day. These constraints should be alleviated if the BBG paid normal market rates for the transcripts. According to the BBG, government contractors charge \$3,348 for one hour of translation and transcription. A survey of private sector businesses providing the same services reveal normal market rates ranging from \$500 to \$1,800 an hour.

There are several questionable uses of funds at BBG that can be addressed to relieve budgetary constraints. For example, in 2006, Congress gave \$36.1 million to VOA for democracy promotion in Iran, but \$13.8 million was diverted for agency-wide infrastructure improvements. There are also offsets from the State Department or foreign operations that we can discuss, as I have mentioned to you, to help cover translation costs.

Thank you for looking into my concerns with U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communications. If you would like to discuss this further, please feel free to call me or my staff, Trey Hicks, at 202.224.2254.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tom Coburn", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Senator Tom Coburn, M.D.