

Nov 04, 2016 by **Javad Rad**

Obama's BBC Public Diplomacy ^[1]

In his exclusive interview with the BBC Persian Television, President Obama responded not only to the Iranian president's remarks at the UN General Assembly, but also to some of the concerns of Iranians and Afghans with regards to his administration's foreign policy. Beyond the harsh rhetoric on who is to blame for 9/11, this appearance on BBC Persian has a few notable implications for U.S. public diplomacy apparatus in general and its policy towards Iran in particular.

The fact that Obama went to the BBC to talk to Iranian people signals the weakness in U.S. public diplomacy apparatus, namely its own international broadcasting to Iran. Since the U.S. government has established its Persian TV service within Voice of America (VOA PNN) and funded it for nearly 15 years, why should the U.S. president resort to another country's public diplomacy network to speak to a foreign audience? The reason lies in the size of audience one can reach. Obviously VOA has not been able to reach a sizable audience inside Iran. The unfortunate case for VOA is that BBC Persian service (established in 2009) is newer than VOA PNN, and yet, with its high standards of journalism, has managed not only to overtake Persian channels like VOA but also reach a position where it could be considered a potential instigator of political unrest in Iran. Obama's speech to Iranians via BBC is certainly a signal to the people in this country but also an alert to producers and editors of VOA PNN who almost certainly watched the interview with envy.

Obama's BBC public diplomacy indicates another shift and that is a huge step towards the (old) policy of considering Iranian government separate from its people. While early in his presidency Obama adhered to engagement; realities in Washington, elections in Iran, and problems on nuclear issue soon weakened his political power. Now, in his interview with BBC, Obama seems to be following the same path as other U.S. presidents. He stands tough on human rights issues, adheres to sanctions, does not rule out an Israeli pre-emptive attack on Iran, and tries to talk to the Iranian people rather than their government. Considering Tehran's anger with BBC Persian, one could infer from Obama's talk on the BBC that he has washed his hands of dealing with Ahmadinejad's administration and would rather weaken it by sanctions and supporting the Green movement in favor of a future change in the political atmosphere. There are certainly many ordinary Iranians that have heard Obama on BBC Persian, but it is probably the politicians in Tehran who understood the message as more than just the refutation of Ahmadinejad's comments. The broadcast signaled the emergence of a sophisticated change in foreign policy which will probably continue until either Obama's or Ahmadinejad's presidential terms end.
