

Nov 04, 2016 by **Javad Rad**

An American Virtual Embassy in Tehran? ^[1]

In a clear act of public diplomacy, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appeared on BBC Persian this week to engage the network's Iranian audience on a range of issues regarding the state of relations between Iran and America. In an interview-format program, she tried to address some important issues raised by Iranians living either in Iran or outside the country. Throughout her remarks, she brought up one eye-catching idea, an American virtual embassy in Tehran, which could be regarded as the most recent initiative of the Obama administration to communicate with Iranians. Such a concept appears to be noble at first glance, especially when one acknowledges the fact that the United States has had no official embassy in Iran for more than three decades now. But there are some serious questions about the possibility and responsibility of such an embassy which, if not clarified, would downgrade the initiative into simply yet another international information program of the State Department.

The most burning question here is whether it would truly act as an embassy? It is the answer to this question which will show the potency of the U.S. virtual embassy in Iran. We should be aware that embassies are traditionally responsible for the three significant tasks of *official representation*, *information gathering*, and bilateral *negotiations*. That is, embassies are usually occupied by an ambassador officially *representing* his/her country; embassies are committed to *information gathering* and this happens mostly through direct/physical contacts with the host society in order to diminish chances of misperception; and that embassies are places where behind the door *negotiations* happen between officials of both nations during mostly face-to-face (i.e. physical) meetings in order to resolve problems of mutual concern. Now, the problem for the virtual embassy in Tehran is that the prospect of performing such duties is hardly foreseeable. There are a couple of reasons for that.

First, the fact that the U.S. virtual embassy in Iran is a virtual space, automatically hampers its capacity to engage in traditional/physical forms of *information gathering* thus making it almost impossible to capture the "local taste" of the host society. Sure, it could establish contact with some Iranians, but it would be similar to establishing contact with Iranians anywhere else on the internet (e.g., Facebook) which the U.S. government already does, and even in that case, the problem of physical presence still persists.

Second, the U.S. government could appoint a virtual ambassador to Tehran to *represent* the United States, but his abilities to engage in ambassadorial service will hardly go beyond lecturing as a public affairs officer. Engaging in behind-the-doors negotiations, the most important duty of an ambassador, will hardly be possible for the Tehran ambassador for two particular reasons; first, due to the currently hostile status of relations between Iran and America, no Iranian official will risk his political career by engaging an American official online, and even if an individual does so on their own, any negotiation will clearly be devoid of any legitimacy and executive guarantee; second, considering the highly sensitive nature of any negotiations with the United States, Iranian officials will be the most unwilling to use virtual networks, instead of physical face-to-face meetings, to discuss their grievances and issues

with their American counterparts.

And third, while the virtual embassy could potentially make a breakthrough in the realm of handling consulate duties such as issuing visas for the Iranians, something that traditionally needs face-to-face interviews, it seems far from reality that consulate services will be provided online due to the security implications it might have for the U.S. government.

Such inevitable challenges and shortcomings threaten the initiative to be downgraded to a simple information operation. It certainly has its roots in the U.S. government's strong tendency to enhance its public diplomacy programs towards Iran by exploiting the potentials of the internet. The Obama administration has, in fact, used Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and other networking devices to win the hearts and minds of Iranians. Secretary Clinton's American virtual embassy in Tehran, despite its glamorous name, appears to be yet another public diplomacy enterprise. If it fails to perform the traditional duties of an embassy, it would be very much like America.gov, a State Department project launched during the Bush administration but which soon failed to achieve its goals. It remains to be seen whether the American virtual embassy in Tehran will face the same music.
