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**From:** Emily Blout [eblout@niacouncil.org]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 11, 2007 1:20 PM  
**To:** 'Celes\_Hughes@mikulski.senate.gov'  
**Cc:** 'Trita Parsi'  
**Subject:** Iran democracy funding background materials  
**Attachments:** Mehdi\_Khalaji\_US broadcasting in Iran.pdf; Shirin Ebadi article May 30 2007.doc; Gangi\_Money Cant buy democracy.doc; Emad Baghi\_Letter to the UN and human rights community.docx; Democracy Promotion Talking Points\_NIAC.doc; Secor\_THE CASE FOR DOING NOTHING.doc

Celes,

Per our conversation this afternoon, I am sending some background information regarding the Iran democracy funding included in HR 2764. Please see [NIAC's op-ed in The Hill today](#) as well as the points (below). I have also attached a scathing report by the Washington Institute on US broadcasting in Iran as well as articles by Iranian human rights activist and Nobel laureate, Shirin Ebadi, and others published in the New York Times and the International Herald Tribune.

- **Prominent democracy and human rights activists in Iran have called for the termination of the democracy promotion program.** Such Iranian activists include Noble Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, renowned investigative journalist, Akbar Ganji, and human rights activist and former political prisoner, Emadeddin Baghi.
- **Rather than promoting democracy, the US funding has narrowed the space for the pro-democracy movement to operate.** The widely publicized funding has fueled the Iranian government's paranoia of a covert US mission to institute regime change through soft revolution. It has used this threat as an excuse to create a securitized atmosphere and crack down on civil society.
- **Because the recipients of the US funding are secret, everyone is treated as a potential conspirator and subject for harassment by the Iranian government.** The resulting crack-down has been broad and severe, targeting all elements of civil society and employing harsher measures to punish suspected recipients of US funding. This includes the investigation and closure of civil society organizations, as well as the interrogation and arrest of human rights activists and scholars. This funding is- [in the words of Human Rights Watch at a recent NIAC conference](#) – "like painting a target on their backs."
- **Increased funding for Voice America Persian has paradoxically contributed to the substantial decline in the quality and effectiveness of its programming.** VOA has struggled to find experienced staff and has instead hired political activists with loyalty to their agenda rather than to the VOA mandate. According to insiders at VOA, this has led to its loss of credibility among the Iranian public.

This is not to say the US should not promote democracy in Iran, rather it should employ other means towards this end. Positive steps that could be taken include:

- **Lift US sanctions on NGO activities: People to people exchanges should be between people; the governments should butt out.** Right now, US organizations cannot conduct cultural and academic exchanges with their counterparts in Iran without obtaining a license from the OFAC. The fastest track to an OFAC license is through acceptance of US government funding. This essentially forces American *non*-government organizations to turn to the US government to conduct their exchanges. Genuine people to people exchanges, absent of government interference, will enhance America's soft power in Iran. The US

should lift its sanctions on exchanges with Iran.

- **Reinvigorate VOA Persian's credibility by cleaning house.** The VOA's credibility has declined sharply over the last 12 months due to poor journalism. An independent review of the organization should be conducted to measure the extent of these shortcomings, including an internal survey of VOA staff and an assessment of the programming.

Celes, I hope you will consider the serious human rights concerns associated with this funding. I would be happy to provide further information and resources to assist you in making the case that this funding should be reduced or its nature changed in conference.

Sincerely,

Emily Blout

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