

MEDIA DYNAMICS IN AFGHANISTAN: THE SCOPE OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Kalandarov Ulmas Fakhriddin ugli

Researcher, TSUOS

olmas.qalandarov24@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper examines the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) as a state-run media complex central to Iran's constitutional model of state-controlled mass communications. It outlines IRIB's governance (Supreme Leader oversight, advisory council), resources (2009 budget and staffing), and declared international mission to promote Iranian history, culture, and the ideological tenets of the Islamic Revolution. The study maps the World Service infrastructure—satellite TV, radio, and multilingual web output—and analyzes its use in advancing counter-narratives to Western media. Focusing on Afghanistan, it shows how evolving media consumption enabled IRIB to cultivate affinity through Dari, Tajik, and Pashto programming, with documented expansion of TV/radio reach and external financing flows. Statements by senior IRIB officials (e.g., on “media war,” Pars Today, and soft-power strategy) illustrate a deliberate public-diplomacy approach that converts emergent signals into durable “nodes of affinity.” The paper concludes that IRIB functions as a strategic soft-power instrument, pairing discursive messaging with cultural diplomacy to shape regional information environments.*

Keywords: IRIB; soft power; public diplomacy; media strategy; counter-narratives; Afghanistan; Pars Today; Supreme Leader oversight

Introduction

State-controlled media remain a central—but often under-specified—instrument of foreign policy in many political systems. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, that function is institutionalized in the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), a vertically integrated broadcaster that concentrates television, radio, and multilingual digital output under a single state authority. Beyond its domestic remit, IRIB presents itself as a global communicator of Iranian history, culture, and the ideological tenets of the Islamic Revolution, positioning its external services as platforms for narrative competition in regional and international arenas.

This paper examines how IRIB operationalizes soft power through public-diplomacy messaging and cultural programming, with a particular focus on Afghanistan. We argue that IRIB's external services do more than disseminate information: they translate state priorities into audience-specific narratives and seek to convert “emergent signals” (shifts in sentiment, identity cues, or issue frames) into durable nodes of affinity. Afghanistan is a salient test case. Geographic proximity, linguistic overlap (Dari/Tajik/Pashto alongside Persian), and dense historical ties create unusually low barriers to reception, while

Afghanistan's evolving media ecology since the early 2000s has expanded the channels through which Iranian messages circulate.

Methodologically, We employ qualitative document and discourse analysis of IRIB statements, policy texts, program descriptions, and leadership interviews, supplemented by secondary scholarship on soft power, public diplomacy, and Afghan media development. Rather than testing causal effects on public opinion—which would require survey or experimental designs beyond our scope—we analyze how messages are constructed, targeted, and justified, and we assess their strategic coherence across time and platforms.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is Iran's state broadcaster, responsible for producing all national television and radio programming across numerous platforms. Under Iran's constitution, mass media is to be administered exclusively by the state, and private companies are legally barred from creating such content for either domestic or international audiences. In 2009, IRIB's budget was estimated at roughly \$900 million, with a workforce of nearly 46,000. The organization's director is appointed by the Supreme Leader and reports directly to that office. A six-member advisory council includes two representatives from each of Iran's three branches of government[1].

Internationally, IRIB declares a mission to introduce global audiences to Iran's history and culture, as well as its diverse regions and historical sites. It is also tasked with advancing the ideas of the Islamic Revolution and the system of the Islamic Republic. IRIB's charter further outlines rules and aims for its external media output—among them, “promoting the grandeur and supremacy of Islam in all programs and avoiding programs contrary to Islamic criteria,” and “creating the conditions to realize and implement the policy of Neither East nor West in politics, social affairs, culture, the economy, and the military, within the laws of the Islamic Republic” (IRIB official website).

IRIB's World Service comprises twenty-nine production hubs that include seven international satellite TV channels, dozens of radio stations, and a broad web platform publishing content in thirty-two languages for a worldwide audience. Programming in Dari, Tajik, and Pashto targets Afghanistan specifically. These channels serve as tools for advancing alternative narratives to those of Western states. As Peyman Jebelli, a former deputy for international programming, remarked in December 2016: “Our international media messages differ from the dominant messages in the global mass media.”

He characterized that difference in near-military terms: “The international programming media platforms of the Islamic Republic of Iran stand on the front lines of the media war. Emerging from obscurity despite being on an uneven battlefield with powerful rivals, it is pursuing an intense struggle with sincere dedication[3].”

Iran's participation in a contest of ideas is evident. Officials responsible for public diplomacy work to define the meaning of flexible concepts used in Iran's broader discourse and to articulate the key messages that convey national objectives. Referencing the export of the Revolution, Jebelli noted: “We have conveyed the idea of the Islamic Revolution to other countries not by force, but on the basis of the logic of human nature.”

In Afghanistan, Iran employs IRIB outlets to convey messages designed to strengthen perceived affinities with Afghan society. Shifts in Afghanistan's media environment have made this easier: during Taliban rule, television and satellite use were highly restricted and radio predominated. By 2010, a U.S. Agency for International Development report estimated that television viewership in Afghanistan had reached up to 48 percent of the population. A 2012 BBC analysis reported that from 2006 to 2012, the reach of television and radio expanded by about 20 percent per year, driven by growing competition between state and private broadcasters. Beyond the United States and Iran, many other countries also backed broadcast outlets directly or funded private Afghan channels.

As a neighboring state, Iran recognizes media as a key lever in Afghanistan's reconstruction. As Amy Ferris-Rotman observed, "Iran's media strategy is another part of the multi-faceted project of extending soft power into Afghanistan." Deep cultural, linguistic, and historical ties give Iran a distinctive advantage in engaging Afghan media[4]. A Herat University professor put it starkly: "When we speak of cultural identity, we speak of Iran's identity, because we do not think an Afghan identity exists".

Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, executive director of the Nia Group for Afghan media development, dates Iran's Afghan media strategy to 2006, with a marked acceleration from 2011, when Iran began actively embedding its perspective in Afghan outlets (Reuters, 2012). By late 2012, nearly one-third of Afghan media were either financially supported by Iran or influenced by Iranian content.

IRIB's then director-general, Dr. Ali Asgari (2016), openly framed public diplomacy as another arena of conflict. In a 2016 interview he said: "Pars Today can find its place in this information war by studying the cultures of different peoples, getting to know them, and producing the right message." The notion of crafting the "right message" through audience understanding echoes Mattern's view of the subjective nature of attraction.

At Pars Today's launch, another IRIB official, deputy for foreign media M. Ahgari, was even more direct: "New and innovative media strategies are an important part of Iran's soft power.[5]" Such statements from IRIB leaders and policymakers underscore an active approach to shaping alternative narratives by turning emergent signals into "nodes of affinity." This discursive approach is deliberate, focused, and strategic—supported by an accompanying suite of cultural-diplomacy tools that are equally significant and effective.

Conclusion

IRIB operates as a state-anchored soft-power instrument: its governance ties to the Supreme Leader, chartered mission, and world-service infrastructure align messaging with national objectives. The Afghanistan case shows how language-specific programming and partnerships translate that mandate into affinity-building and counter-narratives amid a rapidly evolving media market. Public statements framing a "media war" clarify intent: to calibrate messages for targeted audiences and stabilize durable identity linkages. Evidence of financial support, content diffusion, and audience reach suggests measurable — though uneven — impact. Taken together, IRIB illustrates how

discursive strategy and cultural diplomacy can shape regional information environments, warranting closer audience-level and longitudinal evaluation in future work.

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