

## **Questions from Senator Tom Coburn to BBG noms**

The United States has a tense relationship with the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. One of the most effective ways the US Government has of reaching the Iranian people are US Government broadcasts into Iran, including those of the Persian News Network. Frequently, the Persian News Network has been accused of being soft on the Iranian government, including being labeled “the Voice of the mullahs.”

- 1. What are you prepared to do to improve the operations of the Persian News Network?**
- 2. What mechanisms are in place to examine complaints regarding the editorial content of the Persian News Network?**
- 3. Is there in place an oversight process of having English translations of the Farsi language broadcasts of the Persian News Network programs? Should the head of VOA/PNN be able to speak and read the language of the service he or she is overseeing?**
- 4. What actions are you prepared to take to ensure that the news and information broadcast on the Persian News Network is factually accurate and correct and able to rebut any criticism of program content?**

## **Russia:**

5. Within the past two years, the Voice of America (VOA) ended direct radio and television broadcasts to Russia. In this period, Russia invaded the neighboring state of the Republic of Georgia. VOA relies exclusively on its website to reach the Russian people. However, BBG research shows that the reach of VOA inside Russia fell off precipitously following the decision to end direct radio and television broadcasts.

**If confirmed, how would you address this issue?**

6. We have heard very little protest from some of the former BBG members when Mr. Putin's security services used threats and other forms of illegal intimidation to force stations in Russia, which had been using VOA and RFE/RL news to stop these rebroadcasts. The response of the BBG executive staff was to negotiate with the Russians to keep RFE/RL operations in Russia while eliminating VOA broadcasts from Washington.

**Do you think this was a wise decision?**

7. The BBG executive staff claimed that the Internet is a safer medium than radio to use in countries like Russia. But during President Obama's first official visit to Russia, the VOA news website was out of commission for at least two days as a result of a cyber attack by unidentified hackers.

**What kind of multimedia program delivery strategy would you propose to counter such threats and how would you guard against future cyber attacks of this kind?**

8. Twelve days before the Russian military attack on Georgia in Aug. 2008, despite warnings from Congress, journalists and human rights organizations, the BBG shut down Voice of America radio broadcasts in Russian and refused to resume them.

**As a BBG member, if confirmed, how would you guard against such decisions?**

#### **Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra Television:**

The American taxpayer has spent an enormous amount of money on broadcasts to the Arab and Muslim world. At the center of this effort are the broadcasts of Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television. The BBG claims to have an audience of 26 million for Al-Hurra television.

9. **At the same time, these broadcasts do not appear to have any lasting positive resonance with Arab populations. Why?**

10. **As a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, what do you see as necessary in improving the impact of the broadcasts of Al-Hurra television with Arab viewers?**

#### **BBG Strategic Plan:**

A growing concern is being articulated in various quarters that US international broadcasting has lost its way in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and has become an expensive failure. Some of this concern centers on the BBG strategic plan, which places a heavy reliance on advanced modern technologies such as broadband Internet access. Critics see the strategic plan as naïve and overly simplistic.

For example over 2 billion people worldwide make less than \$2 per day. The impoverished are fertile recruitment resources for terrorist organizations. Internet access, particularly broadband access, remains either nonexistent or accessible only at great cost in many parts of the world.

Key strategic areas, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, routinely have unreliable electrical service, making Internet service or sole access to BBG programs found only on the Internet problematic.

The abandonment of shortwave radio and television broadcasts has resulted in precipitous declines in potential audiences for US Government international broadcasting programs.

11. **If confirmed, what do you intend to do to increase accessibility to US Government international broadcasting, including radio and television broadcasts?**

## **China:**

The April 25, 2010 edition of the Washington Post featured a front-page article regarding various operations of the People's Republic of China media operations in the United States. Globally, the Chinese have a \$6.6 billion dollar plan to challenge various Western news giants including the BBC and CNN. The Chinese will soon have twice as many news bureaus in the United States as any Western news outlet has in China.

Not long ago, a Chinese official stated "In the modern age, whichever nation's communications methods are most advanced, whichever nation's communication is strongest...has the most power to influence the world."

### **12. What should be the BBG's plan with regard to these other international broadcasters?**

## **Management:**

There is a long history of documented management problems and counterproductive content in U.S. international broadcasting under the purview of the BBG. My interest has been primarily with U.S. broadcasts to Iran, but others have uncovered problems in other areas including U.S. broadcasts to Arabic, Asian and former-Soviet-satellite countries.

### **13. Please explain what you know of this history and what strategy you will employ while on the Board to hold BBG staff responsible while also reforming U.S. international broadcasting?**

Critics of the BBG have pointed out that some of the BBG permanent staff are partisan, lack journalistic credentials, and have not been held responsible for the documented mismanagement of U.S. international broadcasts.

### **14. What specific steps do you plan on introducing to the Board for reforming the behavior of the BBG permanent staff including the top managers of the agency?**