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Radio Free Iraq and Radio Free Iran: Background, Legislation, and Policy Issues for Congress

January 7, 1999

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

98-539

ABSTRACT

In early 1998 after recurring conflicts with the Iraqi government on weapons sites inspections, Congress debated various nonmilitary actions to support removing Saddam Hussein from power. On May 1, 1998 the President signed the supplemental appropriation (H.R. 3579, P.L. 105-174) which provides funding for a new surrogate broadcasting service--Radio Free Iraq. In addition, Congress passed, and the President signed, the foreign relations authorization legislation within the context of the omnibus appropriations (P.L. 105-277/H.R. 4328). It authorizes appropriations for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to administer Radio Free Iraq and Radio Free Iran. This report tracks legislation and issues pertaining to these two surrogate services. It will be updated periodically.

Summary

This report tracks legislation and issues pertaining to implementation of two new surrogate broadcasting entities: Radio Free Iraq and Radio Free Iran.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government has continued to apply foreign policy tools (that had helped promote the overthrow of communism) to current targeted situations such as the threat posed by radical anti-American regimes in Iraq and Iran. One such tool is surrogate broadcasting.

After the 1997-1998 confrontations over access to suspected weapons sites in Iraq, Congress began considering various nonmilitary ways to remove Saddam Hussein from power, primarily by supporting the Iraqi opposition. One course of action included establishing objective broadcasting in Iraq and adding surrogate broadcasting to the existing general broadcasting into Iran. While Congress supported these actions, the Administration showed less enthusiasm, particularly for a surrogate service to Iran; many U.S. officials believed that relations with the new Iranian government could improve and feared a U.S. surrogate service to Iran would impede progress.

The 105th Congress considered a number of measures relating to broadcasting into Iran and Iraq. In November 1997, within the context of the U.S. Information Agency's FY1998 appropriation, Congress required the creation of surrogate broadcasting (referred to as the Persian or Farsi service) to Iran. Early in 1998, both the House and Senate included language in the supplemental appropriations (H.R. 3579) to fund a new surrogate broadcasting service to be called "Radio Free Iraq." On May 1, 1998, the President signed the bill into law--P.L. 105-174. Congress also passed the foreign relations authorization bill (H.R. 1757) which would have authorized Radio Free Iraq and Radio Free Iran to be administered by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL); however, the President vetoed the bill on October 21, 1998 because of unrelated international family planning language. Within the context of the omnibus appropriations legislation (H.R. 4328/P.L. 105-277), Congress included language to authorize broadcasting in the Farsi language via Radio Free Iran. Also, the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 (H.R. 4655/P.L. 105-338), signed October 31, 1998, authorizes \$2 million for USIA to assist Iraqi opposition organizations with radio and television broadcasting into Iraq. (These funds were not appropriated, however.)

Both Radio Free Iran and Radio Free Iraq began operating on October 30, 1998. The Administration's fears of antagonizing the new Iranian government were confirmed when, three days after RFE/RL's first Farsi broadcast, Iran withdrew its ambassador from Prague and vowed to restrict trade ties with the Czech Republic. Similarly, Iraq officials also made clear its opposition to the broadcasts and said this would "hurt economic ties with the Czech Republic."¹

¹ Reuters, November 3, 1998.

Background

With the end of the Cold War, advocates of an assertive American foreign policy have supported applying cold war techniques to address specific new threats to U.S. security interests, including those posed by the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and the Islamic revolutionary government of Iran. Many, including Lech Walesa of Poland, President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic, and Secretary of State Albright, credit Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) broadcasting during the Cold War with helping end communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The Administration and Congress have agreed on using broadcasting once again to help blunt the strategic threats to the United States, this time posed by Iraq and Iran, though important issues remain unresolved.

U.S. government-sponsored international information and propaganda programs date back to World War I. The use of radio for this purpose began in earnest during World War II when President Roosevelt established and operated, for a short time without the authorization of Congress, an agency for foreign intelligence and propaganda. Since World War II, international broadcasting has become an important element of U.S. public diplomacy throughout the world.²

The Voice of America (VOA), the oldest and largest of the government broadcasting systems, was established during World War II. Under the U.S. Information Agency, VOA provides general broadcasting 24 hours per day in 52 languages around the world. It provides over 900 hours of programming each week and employs about 1,200 people. Under its authorizing Act, VOA has three missions: (1) to provide "a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news"; (2) to represent all of America and "present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions"; and (3) to present "the policies of the United States clearly and effectively ... and to present responsible discussion and opinion on these policies."³

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is the best known example of U.S. surrogate broadcasting. (Cuba Broadcasting and Radio Free Asia are other surrogate services.) RFE/RL began broadcasting in the early 1950s under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency. Today RFE/RL is a private, nonprofit broadcaster funded by grants from USIA's Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). RFE/RL broadcasts approximately 700 hours of programming weekly in 23 languages; it employs some 250 staff journalists in Prague and about 1,000 freelance contributors around the world. Section 312 of the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-236) states that "it is the sense of Congress" that RFE/RL funding "should" be privatized by December 31, 1999. The FY1998 omnibus appropriations Act requires RFE/RL to report before March 1st each year on steps taken to privatize and provide an assessment of whether government funding for surrogate broadcasting is appropriate for FY2000 and beyond.

Broadcasting to the Middle East

The Voice of America currently provides U.S. government-supported broadcasting into Iraq and Iran. VOA broadcasts seven hours per day of Farsi on shortwaves into Iran, one hour per day of Kurdish language broadcasting into Northern Iraq, and seven hours per day of Arabic accessible

² U.S. international broadcasting consists of surrogate and general broadcasting. Surrogate broadcasting provides independent, uncensored, and accurate news and information of events in the targeted country (often a closed society), as well as cultural programs of that country. Surrogate broadcasting includes Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc., Cuba Broadcasting, and Radio Free Asia. In contrast, general broadcasting, carried out by the Voice of America, presents a reliable source of international news, U.S. policies, and American culture to listeners overseas.

³ 22 U.S.C.1463.

to the entire region, including Iraq. VOA provides eight weekly feeds to 12 local (FM) stations in six Arabic countries. In addition, VOA has contingency plans to expand Arabic broadcasting by two hours per day. The expansion can be accomplished within one or two weeks. VOA Arabic TV is on the air for 30 minutes once each week. Additionally, VOA is on the air ten hours per day in English programming to the Middle East. VOA correspondents in the Middle East feed reports to FM stations in Amman, Ramallah, and Tunis. Radio Rabat receives two feeds per week, as does Palestinian radio. VOA also maintains an Arabic dial-in recorded news service with regularly updated news reports. Begun during the Gulf War, this service has been used extensively.

Prior to October 30, 1998, RFE/RL did not broadcast specifically into Iraq, Iran, nor other Persian Gulf countries. It did broadcast into Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, some of which could be heard in Iran and Iraq. RFE/RL had no Arabic, Farsi, or Kurdish language capability for broadcasting into the region, although it did have broad authority to establish new surrogate services there, if deemed important.

Other outside information in Iraq and Iran comes from a number of sources. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) provides a general news service (similar to VOA) for both Iraq and Iran, as does Radio France and Deutche-Welle (from the Netherlands). Several dissident organizations broadcast in Iraq, but many believe that they have little credibility. Israel provides a surrogate broadcast service in Iraq, which also reportedly has little credibility, since most Iraqis continue to regard Israel as a sworn enemy. CNN broadcasts television programs into Iraq and Iran, although it is questionable how many citizens see it. A satellite dish, required for CNN reception, is something most Iraqis cannot afford and is illegal to own both in Iraq and Iran (although somewhat tolerated in both countries). In addition, the CNN broadcasts are primarily to large hotels in key cities and are entirely in English, making them incomprehensible to most local people. In contrast to information via airwaves, print media is the most censored information in Iraq. Only Arabic newspapers and magazines are tolerated, and even those are heavily edited. Iranians, on the other hand, have access to a wider range of foreign media and the press there is relatively free, compared with Iraq.

Congressional Actions

The 105th Congress considered a number of measures expanding broadcasting into Iraq and Iran. In November 1997, Congress added an amendment to the State Department and Related Agencies appropriations legislation (H.R. 2267/P.L. 105-119) requiring in FY1998 that \$4 million of RFE/RL's appropriation be used for surrogate U.S. broadcasting in Farsi into Iran; Congress provided no new funds, however. RFE/RL (with capped appropriations of \$75 million) established a new Farsi language service.

At a February 1998 congressional hearing, within the context of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) appropriations and hearings on Iraq, Administration officials and Members of Congress began exploring the option of using broadcasting to assist Iraqi opposition forces in overthrowing Iraq's president Saddam Hussein. David Burke, Chairman of the USIA's Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), responded to a question on establishing new surrogate broadcast service for Iraq:

“The population of Iraq are prisoners, and they deserve the fresh air of truth and honesty and objectivity coming their way, and we should be allocating resources to that right away.”⁴

⁴ Hearing, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State; testimony by David Burke, Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, USIA, February 26, 1998.

On March 10, 1998, Congress filed a conference report (H.Rept. 105-432) on the foreign relations authorization legislation (H.R. 1757). The House of Representatives passed the bill by voice vote on March 26. The Senate passed the legislation on April 28, 1998. The President vetoed the bill on October 21, 1998 because of unrelated international family planning measures. Section 1813(b) of H.R. 1757 would have provided (in addition to \$10 million for aid to the Iraqi Democratic Opposition) authority for \$5 million for RFE/RL to establish surrogate radio broadcasting to Iraq, referred to as “Radio Free Iraq,” with no year specified for spending. Additionally, Section 1418 of the same legislation would have authorized \$2 million in grants for each FY1998 and FY1999 to go **only** to RFE/RL developing a “Radio Free Iran” broadcasting service.

On May 1, 1998 the President signed FY1998 supplemental appropriations (S. 1768/H.R. 3579; P.L. 105-174) into law. This law provided \$5 million to RFE/RL for surrogate broadcasting to Iraq and required the BBG to submit a plan within 30 days of enactment on establishing the surrogate service.⁵ The funds are to be available until Sept 30, 1999, and the broadcasting service must be called “Radio Free Iraq.” With passage of the bill, Senator Lott had stated, “This is a bipartisan amendment ... a start to a political approach to changing the regime in Iraq.”⁶

Just prior to ending the second session of the 105th Congress voted on measures relevant to U.S. surrogate broadcasting into the Middle East. On October 20, 1998 Congress passed H.R. 4328, popularly referred to as the omnibus appropriations act. It authorizes RFE/RL to establish surrogate broadcasting to the Iranian people in the Farsi language and to be referred to as “Radio Free Iran”. It also requires the BBG to report to Congress within 60 days after enactment of the provision (which would be about December 20, 1998) on the costs and implementation of the surrogate service to Iran. The President signed the bill on October 21, 1998 —P.L. 105-277. Also in October 1998, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 (H.R. 4655). It authorized \$2 million to be appropriated to the USIA for FY1999 for radio and television broadcasting by Iraqi opposition organizations. The measure became law (P.L. 105-338) on October 31, 1998, although these funds were not appropriated.

Broadcasting Issues

The Broadcasting Board of Governors and RFE/RL considered a number of broadcasting issues in the process of establishing Radio Free Iraq and Radio Free Iran: which transmitters to use, possible jamming by the local governments, the hiring of staff, and where the staff should be located. An additional concern is RFE/RL privatization, due to occur by December 1999.

Both Radio Free Iraq and Radio Free Iran (Farsi or Persian language service of RFE/RL) began broadcasting on October 30, 1998. The two surrogate services offer 24-hour on line new service over the internet. Radio Free Iran airs 45 minutes (soon to be increased to one hour) of news, interviews, commentary and call-ins on shortwave broadcasts which it repeats with updates once each day. Radio Free Iraq shortwave broadcasts consist of 1 hour of news, commentary, and interviews with outsiders which is also repeated once each day with updates. The goal by the summer of 1999 is to have each service broadcast 3 hours of original programming each day with 1 repeat (for a total of 6 hours in each country).

The transmitters for the broadcasts are in various countries within the region. IBB overseas the use of all the broadcasting facilities. The transmitters used for the new surrogates may change from time-to-time, depending on transmitter availability, as VOA is also using them. According to

⁵ The BBG sent its report to the relevant House and Senate authorizing and appropriations committees on June 4, 1998.

⁶ Congressional Record, March 23, 1998, p. S2408.

RFE/RL, ongoing transmitter issues include increasing transmitter capability, particularly in Kuwait, if expanded surrogate broadcasting is to occur. RFE/RL is also seeking adequate medium-wave transmitter capability for broadcasting in this region. Both types of transmitter expansions will require an increase in funds, they say.⁷

RFE/RL is authorized to fill a total of 12 or 14 staff positions to work directly with each of the two new surrogates. As of December 1998, RFE/RL has hired between 8 and 10 people for each service, although as many as 43 employees including regional specialists, interpreters and broadcasting monitors are providing indirect support for these new broadcast services. Generally, the staff for Radio Free Iran and Radio Free Iraq are located predominately in Prague, but a few will be in Washington, New York and London.

Establishing these new surrogates has taken time. Newly-hired RFE/RL journalists, researchers, and broadcasters for Radio Free Iran and Iraq are learning as they go on how to report in a closed society. For the most part, the staff reporting into Iraq/Iran now were not with RFE/RL in its early days of reporting into Russia when it was closed. Therefore, there is a certain amount of inexperience and re-inventing the wheel in operating Radio Free Iraq and Radio Free Iran. Another difficulty for the new staff, perhaps hindering their effectiveness, has been that they are navigating between two entirely different foreign policy situations — broadcasting into Iraq vs. into Iran.

About mid-year, appointment of the directors for the new broadcast entities occurred. On July 30, 1998 RFE/RL announced the appointment of Dr. Stephen C. Fairbanks, formerly with the State Department, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, and the Peace Corps, to Director of RFE/RL's Farsi language service. A month later, RFE/RL announced the appointment of Ambassador David Newton, formerly ambassador to Iraq from 1984-1988, ambassador to Yemen from 1994-1997, and a Middle East expert with the Department of State.

The potential audience for these surrogate broadcasts is expected to be low at first, but may gradually increase over time. According to experts on Iraq, in particular, the people are starved for objective information about what is going on inside their own country. Iraqis may not trust the surrogate radio broadcasts at first, because they will likely attribute anti-regime news or cultural information to U.S. propaganda. Over time, however, when the Iraqis are able to verify accounts to be true, the audience of Radio Free Iraq will likely gain in popularity, according to proponents.⁸ Nevertheless, Iraqi authorities have said that they will not even bother to jam Radio Free Iraq broadcasts saying, "We believe our people are immune to hostile propaganda."⁹ Iranians, on the other hand, already have access to a wide range of foreign media. Therefore, Radio Free Iran might have even more difficulty competing and establishing a following.

According to RFE/RL, interviews of people leaving Iraq indicate people are tuning in to Radio Free Iraq out of curiosity. In Iran, on the ground interviews indicate an audience for Radio Free Iran, as well. In both cases, however, there is no indication of whether people are believing what the broadcasts are relaying.

⁷ Conversation with Paul Goble, RFE/RL, December 12, 1998.

⁸ Telephone conversation with Dr. Adeed Dawisha, Professor of Politics, George Mason University, April 30, 1998.

⁹ Iraq says it won't bother to jam broadcasts by U.S.-backed radio, by Leon Barkho, Associated Press, December 1, 1998.

Foreign Policy Issues

Some Members of Congress perceived the foreign policy objectives for establishing Radio Free Iran and Radio Free Iraq as being comparable. According to Senator Brownback, a key sponsor of creating a surrogate broadcasting service to Iran, “The recent elections [in Iran] illustrate the will and desire of the people of Iran for freedom, democratic institutions and lifestyles. Now is the time to give them one more tool to support this desire. The Iranian people are among the most oppressed people in the world. They have very little access to outside information, to diverse political, civil and religious thought.... Radio Free Iran is just one part of a multi-faceted approach to the problem Iran poses to the security of the United States and to our friends and allies in the region.”

Similarly, surrogate broadcasting into Iraq is part of a broader strategy consisting of a wide array of actions to address Saddam Hussein as a threat to U.S. security. That broader strategy, according to an open letter to the President from 28 prominent foreign policy experts, might include recognizing a provisional government in Iraq, restoring a safe haven in Northern Iraq in which the provisional government would have authority, lifting sanctions in liberated areas of the country, and releasing frozen assets to the control of the provisional government in Iraq.¹⁰

In contrast to congressional views, the Clinton Administration was reluctant to embrace either new surrogate service, but especially Radio Free Iran. While the Administration supported increased Farsi-language broadcasting by VOA, it did not support a surrogate service for Iran. At a time when there has been a change in the Iranian government and potential for improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations, State Department officials voiced their position on the congressionally-mandated creation of Radio Free Iran, saying that, “no one should misinterpret [Radio Free Iran] as an attempt to undermine the Iranian government or in any way diluting the very clear position we have that we are encouraged by the developments in Iran, that we believe that the best way to overcome the differences between our two countries is to have an authorized and acknowledged dialogue.... Improvement in the breadth and diversity of information in the public media will add to the political debate, which we note is already taking place in Iran. Whatever happens with this radio broadcasting, we think it will enrich what is already a lively political debate in Iran.”¹¹

While the Administration was more supportive of establishing Radio Free Iraq, most foreign policy officials believe that it is a small foreign policy tool with a very long-run perspective that can only contribute to accomplishing U.S. foreign policy objectives and support the Iraqi opposition if used in concert with policy options.¹² Many in Congress supported establishing surrogates in Iraq and Iran as low-cost, low-risk efforts to support freedom, but others claimed that the effects of the broadcasting would be too slow, with unmeasurable results. The cost is relatively low at the present time --\$5 million for Radio Free Iraq (comparable to the initial funding for Radio Free Asia) and \$4 million for Radio Free Iran. If audiences in these countries never become established, however, or if the target country governments are successful in jamming the broadcasts, then the value of surrogate broadcasting into these countries and the corresponding \$9 million may be questioned.

The Administration’s fears of antagonizing the new Iranian government were confirmed when, three days after RFE/RL’s first Farsi broadcast, Iran withdrew its ambassador from Prague and

¹⁰ Open Letter to the President from the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf, Congressional Record, March 2, 1998, p. S1179.

¹¹ State Department briefing, April 15, 1998.

¹² See CRS Report, *Iraq: U.S. Policy Options*, by Kenneth Katzman, 98-393F.

vowed to restrict trade ties with the Czech Republic. Similarly, Iraq officials also made clear its opposition to the broadcasts and said they would “hurt economic ties with the Czech Republic.”¹³ In December 1998, at the time of the U.S. attacks on Baghdad, Czech officials increased security around the broadcasting headquarters in Prague.

Radio Free Iraq Director David Newton stated that RFE/RL expanded its broadcasts into Iraq to two 2-hour broadcasts daily following the December air strikes on Baghdad. The original daily 2 hours was live, with one repeat daily. While the U.S. government funds Radio Free Iraq, it does not influence its content. Newton stated, however, that “we share the same goals of democracy and human rights. We are using truth and objectivity to get through the totalitarian wall. We reported reaction from around the world--positive and negative, and from the Middle East, positive and negative.”¹⁴

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¹³Reuters, November 3, 1998.

¹⁴Reuters, U.S.-backed Radio Free Iraq increases broadcasts, by John Mastrini, December 18, 1998.