

The Media War

By Khody Akhavi | June 28, 2007

As the George W. Bush administration struggles through its last two years in office, it appears that the agenda of neoconservative ideologues has finally lost its appeal among strategic parts of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus.

But as their influence has waned at the Pentagon and State Department, neo-conservative hawks have taken charge on the battlefield of public diplomacy.

Intent on fixing what American Enterprise Institute (AEI) fellow Joshua Muravchik termed Bush's "public diplomacy mess," right-wing hawks have gained control of the weapons in the "war of ideas": U.S. government-funded and supported media outlets such as Voice of America (VOA), Al-Hurra, and Radio Farda, which broadcast to the Middle East and aim to offer an alternative view of the news.

The recent appointment of Jeffrey Gedmin, a veteran neoconservative polemicist, as the director of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE), and a smear campaign that led to the recent resignation of Larry Register, Al-Hurra's former news director, appear to herald a turn toward more ideologically rigid programming.

As a result, viewers and listeners of U.S.-supported media in the Middle East are being exposed to a tougher ideological line that endorses the hallmarks of the neoconservative agenda—regime change and interventionist policies in the region.

"No group other than neocons is likely to figure out how to do that," wrote Muravchik, in a December 2006 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine entitled "Operation Comeback," a reference to the declining influence of neoconservatives in the Bush administration. "We are, after all, a movement whose *raison d'être* was combating anti-Americanism in the United States. Who better then to combat it abroad?"

In a widely circulated e-mail memo sent to White House adviser Karl Rove in July 2006 and obtained by the Inter Press Service, the former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich also criticized the State Department's inability to manage the information campaign advocating U.S. foreign policy interests in the region.

He called on Karen Hughes, undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the State Department, to "run the information operation aimed at delegitimizing Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah every day."

Earlier this year, a report authored by Ladan Archin, head of the Pentagon's Iran directorate who in the run-up to the Iraq War worked in the agency's controversial Office of Special Plans, charged that both VOA's Persian TV service and Radio Farda, a Persian-language radio station that broadcasts from Prague and Washington, were too soft in their criticism of Iran's regime.

Archin's report, which was obtained by the McClatchy Newspapers Washington bureau, complained that, while VOA's Persian TV service "often invites guests who defend the Islamic Republic's version of issues, it consistently fails to maintain a balance by inviting informed guests who represent another perspective on the same issue."

With the neoconservative drums beating inside the Washington Beltway, the reshuffling of key positions at RFE and Al-Hurra came as no surprise.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in February a major initiative to promote democracy in Iran, including \$50 million to increase Persian-language television broadcasts.

Congress also appropriated \$21.4 million to expand VOA's Persian television programming to 12 hours a day, and \$14.7 million more for Radio Farda (which means "tomorrow" in Farsi).

In early 2007, the Broadcasting Board of Governors' chairman, Kenneth Tomlinson, named Gedmin, a former AEI fellow and a founding member, along with Vice President Dick Cheney and former Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, of the Project for the New American Century, as RFE's director. Gedmin's new job gave him control over Radio Farda and Voice of America. Some

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listeners have since noted changes in the tone and content of their programming.

A June 14 VOA broadcast in Persian, for example, featured an original interview with AEI fellow and leading neoconservative Richard Perle on the future of democracy in Iran, as well as a roundtable discussion with Shahryar Ahi, chief organizer of a conference of Iranian opposition groups in Paris. Ahi, an informal liaison during the 1970s between the Shah of Iran Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and the White House, currently works with the Shah's 45-year-old, Washington-based son, Reza Pahlavi.

Radio Farda has featured three exclusive and well-publicized interviews with Perle, Michael Rubin, yet another AEI fellow, and Pahlavi, according to Hossein Derakhshan, an Iranian blogger whose weblog, hoder.com, is widely read.

As the Bush administration ramps up its offensive against Iran's regime through VOA and Radio Farda, neoconservatives have also taken aim at Al-Hurra, a U.S.-sponsored Arabic-language satellite television station that broadcasts to 22 countries across the Middle East on an annual budget of more than \$70 million.

In early June, Register resigned from Al-Hurra after less than six months on the job, in the wake of a series of public attacks against him and the station's allegedly anti-U.S. content by neoconservative columnist Joel Mowbray in the opinion pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Mowbray complained that Register was directly responsible for most Al-Hurra broadcasts that, among other things, carried Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's December 2006 speech in its entirety, reported uncritically on last year's Holocaust conference in Iran, and

referred to the establishment of Israel in 1948 as "al Naqba," which means "catastrophe" in Arabic.

"Our taxpayer-financed Arabic network was set up to counter Al-Jazeera, not echo it," he wrote.

Since its launch in 2004, Al-Hurra had served as the centerpiece of Washington's "aggressive post-9/11 courtship of the Arab world" and was "fulfilling its mission" until it hired Register, according to Mowbray.

Yet Register's predecessor, Mouafac Harb, resigned a month after a scathing report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that Al-Hurra lacked "a comprehensive, long-term strategic plan" and criticized its reported audience statistics.

Register, a veteran producer and vice president who worked at CNN for 20 years, was supposed to boost the profile of the station, win audience share, and generate political debate. But his attempts to appeal to an Arab audience ostensibly went against the goals of the neo-conservative establishment in Washington.

"The conservative crusade against Register demonstrates one of the great difficulties facing any official American broadcasting in the Middle East," wrote Marc Lynch, a professor at George Washington University whose blog, abuaardvark.com, on Arab media and politics is widely read in Washington, in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper.

"To be a free and credible media outlet means allowing critics of American policy to speak and covering news that might make America look bad," he noted.

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