

## **Persian Language TV Channel Stalled**

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Some suspect Afghanistan has cooled to the idea of shared broadcasts with Iran and Tajikistan.

The launch of a Persian language television channel by Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan has been postponed yet again despite an announcement in March that it was imminent.

The Iranian ambassador to Tajikistan, Ali-Asghar Sherdoost, told the semi-official Mehr News Agency on March 20 that the first broadcast of the channel would take place that night with the official launch a few days later.

A month on, and there is still no announcement about the channel starting up.

Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan are considered the three main Persian language-speaking countries and they have been negotiating on the project for over a decade. The Afghan language Dari and Tajik are dialects of Persian.

Former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani first proposed the idea in 1991 after Tajikistan gained independence following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. At the time, Iran was showing interest in the former Soviet states of Central Asia and the Caucasus that were once part of the Persian civilisation.

With the start of the Afghan and Tajik civil wars in the 1990s, however, the plan was cast aside.

In July 2006, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad once again brought up the idea of a joint television channel at a meeting of the heads of the three states in the Tajik capital Dushanbe.

The head of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, IRIB, Ezzatollah Zarghami, who is appointed by Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, travelled to Afghanistan and Tajikistan in February 2009 to discuss the plan.

Official media, reporting Sherdoost's statement in March, said the initial capital for launching the channel would be 2.5 million US dollars and it would begin work in Dushanbe with 110 employees.

One of the major issues around the launch of the venture is the difference in the broadcasting policies of the three countries since Afghan and Tajik media are open and liberal compared to Iran.

Since the presidential election in Iran last June, more than 100 journalists have been detained. IRIB, which attracts the most viewers in Iran, follows a strict censorship policy on news and other programmes. Censorship is not limited to political issues and covers anything that does not correspond with the regime's religious views.

Musical performances, including singing and dancing by women, are normal on Afghan and Tajik television. Last December, in contrast, the head of IRIB announced more restrictions including a cutback in the use of music and a ban on women presenters wearing makeup and went as far as banning any joking between women and men on television.

"If there is a female guest on a show the presenter must also be a woman," Zarghami said, describing the main objective of IRIB as guiding young adults towards Islam.

In July 2008, delegations from the three countries discussed the content and structure of the programmes of the joint television channel and explicitly debated the possibility of airing concerts and dancing and whether women presenters should wear the hijab as they do on Iranian TV.

Zarghami announced in February 2009 that his country has no issues with Afghan and Tajik productions that do not comply with Iranian policies, "but the programmes that we will be offering from the Islamic Republic of Iran will be in compliance with our standards."

Iran's ambassador to Tajikistan said at the time that the reason for the delay in launching the channel was that there had been no definitive response from the Afghan culture ministry.

Afghan officials had previously used the excuse that they wanted programmes aired in Pashto, Afghanistan's other main language, along with the Persian broadcasts.

Afghan minister of information and culture, Makhdoom Raheen, who has just taken office, appears cool to the idea of launching a joint television channel. He told the Afghan daily Mandegar on January 22 that he was unaware of the history of the proposal to launch such a channel.

A former senior official at Radio Television Afghanistan, RTA, speaking on condition of anonymity, says that the main concern for the Afghans is possible Iranian efforts to use the channel to promote their political and ideological views.

He questioned the need for joint investment in the project, with the risk of conflict over the content, when Iran already has a number of satellite channels.

Iran launched an Arabic language channel, Al-Alam, in 2003, before the US-led invasion of Iraq. This allowed it to influence public opinion in the region and it even became the leading channel in Iraq for a while.

Afghan journalist Shahbaz Harati says that Afghan officials may fear that the joint channel will have the same anti-American tone of some of the material aired by Al-Alam.

Opposing US policies that have helped bring to power the present Afghan government is a common feature of Iranian media productions.

Zarghami, however, has said that Iran would air programmes that would consider the sensitivities of all three countries.

With its experience and success in television production, Iran is likely to hold the most power in the joint television venture. Iran produces 300 movies and 4,000 hours of television drama annually. A number of Iranian productions are currently being aired in Tajikistan.

The Iranian authorities are pressing ahead with plans for the new channel at a time when foreign competitors are also threatening them. Tehran officials have been using electronic jamming to interfere with the broadcast of popular foreign channels like BBC Persian and Voice of America, which played an important role in giving voice to the opposition after the country's post-election unrest.

Apart from political and news channels, Iran's official broadcaster faces competition from commercial Persian language channels. Farsi 1 - a joint venture of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. and Afghanistan's Moby Group - broadcasts dubbed or subtitled movies and popular American TV series and has gathered a significant viewership in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

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