

Iran and Cuba Zap U.S. Satellites

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

Acting on behalf of the mullahs in Tehran, Fidel Castro has been jamming U.S. satellite broadcasts into Iran from an electronic-espionage base outside of Havana.

State sponsors of terrorism not only threaten U.S. interests on land, at sea and in the air, but now they have teamed up to attack U.S. assets in space. By successfully jamming a U.S. communications satellite over the Atlantic Ocean, the regimes of Cuba and Iran challenged U.S. dominance of space and the assumptions of free access to satellite communication that makes undisputed U.S. military power possible.

The Bush administration, meanwhile, appears paralyzed about how to cope with this latest threat, which one U.S. official likens to an "act of war." The target of these terrorist states: Telestar-12, a commercial communications satellite orbiting at 15 degrees west, 22,000 miles above the Atlantic.

At press time, nearly a month has passed since the Cuban government began jamming U.S. government and private Persian-language TV and radio broadcasts into Iran. At a time when international political change and military action can be decided within a matter of days, the U.S. government assumes unfettered access to communications satellites to be a crucial tool of statecraft. Americans use satellites to broadcast and relay radio and TV programming into denied areas such as North Korea, Cuba, Iran, the People's Republic of China and even friendly countries.

A hostile attack on a U.S. communications satellite, even if that attack only jams a signal for a few days or weeks, could be decisive in the current environment of geopolitical instability. The Pentagon sees communications satellites as vital tools to promote "regime change" where hostile or terrorist-sponsoring governments can be undermined from



within simply by broadcasting honest and accurate news and information to truth-starved populations. The Bush administration belatedly has recognized the power of news in places such as Iran, where popular demonstrations against the theocracy of mullahs have been building for several years.

The jamming of Telestar-12 began on July 6, coinciding with the startup of a new Persian-language TV news broadcast to Iran sponsored by the Voice of America (VOA). The VOA started the half-hour evening program, *News and Views*, just as a new wave of pro-democracy protests was about to challenge a regime the White House considered part of the "Axis of Evil" along with North Korea and the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Iranian television is censored to redact news about the increasing unrest against the government.

"The program had been designed to give Iranian audiences more truthful, objective news than is available through



state-controlled media," says Steven Johnson, a former State Department official and public-diplomacy expert now at the Heritage Foundation. Iranian journalists working inside their country provide the VOA with news stories and video footage. The program augments impressive 24-hour TV-broadcasting efforts by Iranian expatriates in California and praised by President George W. Bush in a July 29 press conference [see p. 36].

Satellite television has grown in popularity in Iran as a way of receiving quality entertainment and news — a far cry from the rerun fare and regime propaganda broadcast on Iran's six major channels. Though the regime banned satellite dishes in 1995, Iranians now own more than 1 million of them, many of which are small and easily concealed. About six Persian-language TV channels, run by Iranian expatriates, also are beamed into Iran. Those broadcasts are uplinked to the Telestar-5 satellite orbiting above the territorial United States, downlinked to the Washington International Teleport in Northern Virginia and then uplinked again to Telestar-12 above the Atlantic, where they are beamed down to Iran. Satellite-broadcasting

EDITOR'S NOTE: "TELESTAR" IS MISHELDEN "TELESTAR"



experts say that Tehran is not able to jam Telestar-12 directly because its stationary orbit is out of the range of that country's antenna-based jammers. But, while the mullahs can't touch Telestar-12, their ally in Havana can and does.

When Telestar-12's owner, Loral Skynet, learned of the jamming it hired Chantilly, Va.-based Transmitter Location Systems LLC (TLS) to use its orbiting geolocation system to vector in on the source of the interference with the satellite's transponders. Within three days, TLS had the location: 22 degrees, 55 minutes, 43 seconds north by 82 degrees, 23 minutes, 19 seconds east — Bejucal, a Russian-built electronic-intelligence facility about 20 miles southwest of Havana.

A June 2001 study examined the Bejucal base's offensive capabilities apart from espionage. Authored by Manuel Cereijo, a professor of electrical and computer engineering at Florida International University, the study found that Bejucal, with 10 antenna arrays, was equipped to launch electronic attacks on U.S. computer systems. Specifically, it warned that Cuba could wage denial-of-service attacks that “pre-

vent or inhibit the normal use or management of communications facilities.”

In a follow-on study released last February, Cereijo wrote, “Bejucal is an electronic-espionage base used by the Cuban military intelligence to intercept and process international communications passing via communications satellites.” Desmond Ball, a professor with the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at Australia National University, says that the People's Republic of China has operated from Bejucal since early 1999, following a February 1998 cooperation agreement. Ball says that Bejucal's main functions are interception of telephone communications and conducting “cyberwarfare.”

If the Bush administration already had been floundering at political action and political warfare against enemies abroad, it was caught with its pants down by the time VOA started its low-budget news show for Iran. Intelligence analysts are not sure about the extent of Chinese technical involvement, but the Cubans were able to stop a new U.S. hearts-and-minds campaign with the flip of a switch.

As soon as the jamming was identified and related facts were in, Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, chairman of the independent

Revolutionary television:

News, information and other programming broadcast by satellite from the United States into Iran fuels the democracy movement in that Muslim country.

Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) that oversees VOA, went on the attack, saying the jamming was “illegal and interferes with the free and open flow of international transmissions.” But the rest of the Bush administration went into default mode, filing diplomatic protests and trying to persuade international satellite-service providers to deny service to Cuba. “We raised the jamming with the government of Cuba. The interference with Loral Skynet commercial satellite transmissions appears to emanate from the vicinity of Cuba and does appear to be intentional,” State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters on July 18. Nearly a month later, the transmissions to Telestar-12 still were being jammed, according to Zia Atabay, president of National Iranian Television (NITV), a private and independent channel that broadcasts from its studios in Woodland Hills, Calif.

At least NITV's 24/7 broadcasting still

Expatriate Television Excites Iran

Private citizens started a successful news and information operation against the Iranian regime long before the U.S. government decided to do so at the Voice of America. Iranian-American businessmen in California, not federal diplomats or information warriors, founded the first significant TV stations to break through the fundamentalist regime's censorship, even as U.S. government broadcasts seemed carefully tailored not to offend the mullahs.

One of the half-dozen expatriate channels is National Iranian Television (NITV) based near Los Angeles. Rock musician Zia Atabay started NITV several years ago as a business to serve the nearly 1 million Iranian expatriates and Americans and Canadians of Iranian descent who now live across North America. Soon, however, Atabay's channel took on a political dimension to try to liberate the land of his birth after a technical glitch accidentally uplinked the signal to a satellite that beamed the programming into Iran. NITV was an instant hit, with thousands of callers from Iran flooding NITV's telephones and fax machines,

turning the channel into an interactive forum for Iranians anxious to expose the corruption and cruelty of the regime, while serving as a 24-hour telebridge to the United States.

The regime soon jammed the transmissions, but NITV raised more funds for stronger, seemingly jamproof, uplinks via Telestar-12.



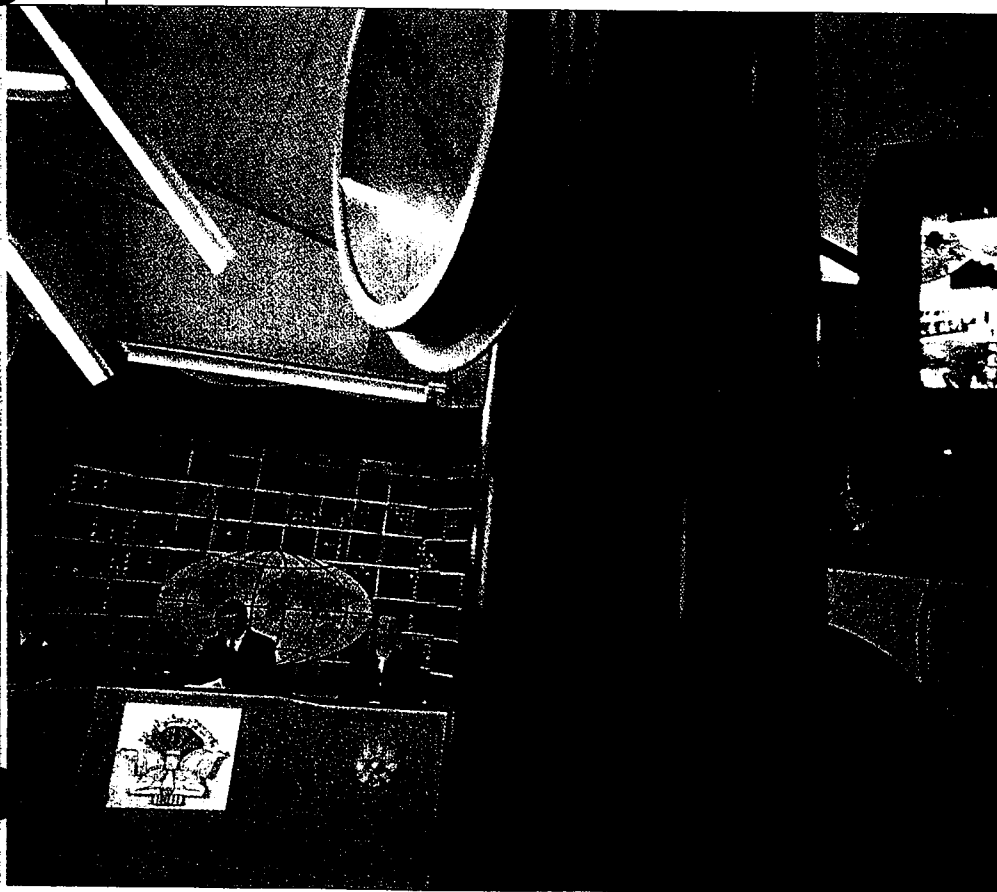
Since the Cuba-based jamming of Telestar-12, Atabay's privately funded enterprise is pushing him toward bankruptcy, forcing him soon to lay off workers.

So what is the Bush administration doing to support NITV? On July 29, President George W. Bush in his press conference made a pointed reference to Atabay's efforts. "There's a TV station ... that is broadcast out of Los Angeles by one of our citizens. He ... has footed the bill. It's widely watched. ... The people of Iran are interested in freedom and we stand by their side." The president apparently had not been briefed on Cuba's jamming.

"In no way are they helping us," says an NITV staffer, before tracking down Atabay for this reporter. "I'm an American," Atabay tells *INSIGHT*. "I'm American, but my government doesn't support me. I told the State Department, 'If I'm doing something wrong, tell me, what did I do?' They said, 'You're doing great.'"

By not supporting the most influential Iranian-American broadcaster, the Bush administration is by inaction handing a victory to the mullahs ruling Teheran. In Atabay's words, "They are going to shut my mouth in America by remote control from Iran."

— JMW



was under constant jamming attack. Interviews with several U.S. officials produce conflicting information about what happened with the VOA transmissions to Iran. Some flatly say that the jamming continues. Others claim the jamming has stopped. One published account states that the jamming ended on July 14, while another says that VOA rerouted its Persian-language programs through other satellites. Still other officials say they aren't sure:

Atabay thinks the State Department cut a deal with Cuba or Iran, persuading the jammers to let VOA's half-hour of news get through to Iran but leaving the full-time private broadcasters to fend for themselves. "These days I'm going nuts because I can't believe that our government doesn't take it seriously," says Atabay. "They are still jamming our signal. NITV is on the same satellite, Telestar-12, as VOA, on different platforms, but both are jammed. Last month, [Secretary of State Colin] Powell was talking softly about Iran, but Iranians are upset

On the air: Live satellite broadcasts from National Iranian Television studios in Hollywood reach an estimated 20 million viewers in Iran who own banned satellite dishes.

because they think there's a deal to [cut us off]. This is a violation of international law. If they [the Iranian and Cuban governments] can block my broadcasts and bankrupt me, tomorrow they will go after another one. Tomorrow they can go after CNN or CBS." Fox News has covered the fate of NITV, Atabay reports, but "CNN didn't say a word."

The Cuban government, through its daily Communist Party broadsheet, denies all allegations. It accused BBG Chairman Tomlinson of making a "string of anti-Cuba lies" by calling the jamming "a serious threat to satellite communications." The Cuban foreign ministry assailed the United States for what it called "radio-electronic aggression against Cuba" in the form of Washington's broadcasts to the island. But the Castro regime praised the U.S. State Department: "Instead of publicly lying as Mr. Tomlinson did, [U.S. authorities] handed over two diplomatic notes asking for the cooperation of the Cuban government and presenting technical information on supposed Cuban interference with U.S. communications."

Broadcasting is a major instrument of warfare on both sides of the war on terror, just as it was during the Cold War, when decades of balanced truth-telling by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) helped to roll back the thick fog of communist censorship and hastening the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Havana openly acknowledges jamming U.S. TV and radio broadcasts into Cuba, including TV Marti. "With every right, Cuba has interfered, is interfering and will continue to interfere solely with the illegal radio and television transmissions that the U.S. government is sending to our country," the Cuban foreign ministry said in a July 18 communique. "In that we are aided by the sovereign right to defend our radio-electronic space from the subversive radio and television aggression directed at our country since the early years of the revolution." Havana is working in the United Nations to codify into international law the legality of state ownership of the news media and jamming of unauthorized broadcasts.

U.S. broadcasting into Cuba via Radio Marti and TV Marti has been met with a wall of jamming from Havana for two generations. "For nearly four decades Cuba has maintained sophisticated, electronic intelligence-gathering and offensive capabilities, which range from tapping U.S. phone conversations to jamming radio-communications signals and launching computer viruses. To date, U.S. decisionmakers have done little more than work around them, since they were never considered serious threats," says the Heritage Foundation's Johnson. Jam-

ming Telestar-12 for Iran, he asserts, should prompt U.S. officials to take Cuba's information-warfare capabilities seriously. And it should be met with a tough response, administration supporters say. "Interfering with outside transmissions intended for a third country borders on hostile action," says Johnson. "A weak response may invite further mischief." But a "ham-handed" response, Johnson adds, might give Cuban dictator Fidel Castro a martyr image he craves.

The Center for Security Policy sees the issue differently. "Bejucal is now a terrorist asset," it says in a statement. "It gives Castro enormous abilities to conduct information warfare against U.S. assets in space and presents a major threat to U.S. space dominance. It is difficult to overstate the gravity of this development. President Bush should order the destruction of the Bejucal facility—now—before the threat worsens." Yet the Bush administration acts as though it's helpless, according to NITV's Atabay: "I don't believe it can happen, that America cannot deal with a terrorist government."

Iran is playing tough not only at home but against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, mainly using political warfare. "The Iranians are interfering through the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps]," a top U.S. official tells *INSIGHT*. "They are quite active along the border and particularly in the south."

Details About the Telestar-12 Satellite

Type: Communications satellite. One of eight currently in the Telestar series, and considered one of the most technologically advanced.

Owner: Loral Skynet of New Jersey. Management and control center in Hawley, Pa.

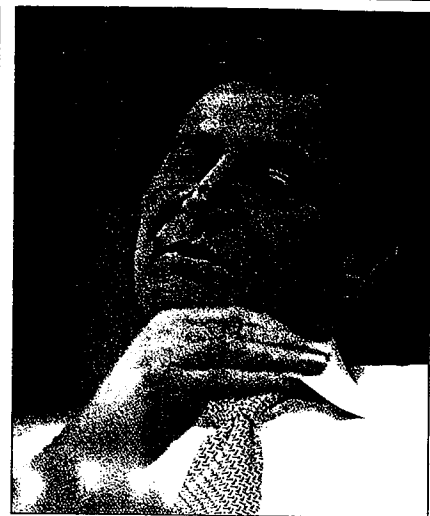
Launched: October 1999, aboard *Ariane 44LP*.

Coverage: North America as far west as Cleveland and Atlanta; the majority of South America; Europe as far east as the Ural Mountains in Russia and south into North Africa; the United Arab Emirates; South Africa.

Orbit: Geosynchronous orbit, 15 degrees west.

Markets: Video for broadcast and business television; high-speed Internet access and private multimedia services to link both sides of the Atlantic.

Source: Loral Skynet



Opposition leader: Atabay believes his broadcasts from NITV will lead to the toppling of Iran's Islamic theocracy.

From the Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar in the south, the state of Qatar and members of Qatar's ruling Wahhabi family play both sides of the terrorism war. While hosting the theater headquarters of the U.S. Central Command, the Qatari regime and members of the ruling family co-own the pan-Arab satellite channel Al-Jazeera, filling Arab TV viewers with anti-American invective [see "Live From Qatar: It's Jihad Television," March 4, 2002]. "Al-Jazeera's role is extremely unhelpful" to U.S. antiterrorism efforts and to pacification of Iraq, a senior U.S. official tells *INSIGHT*. The State Department, he says, already has issued démarches to the government of Qatar, without meaningful results.

Meanwhile, Iranian broadcasts into Iraq are intended to incite, organize and reinforce opposition among Iraqi Shiites to the United States and its allied occupation coalition, according to a Pentagon analyst. The United States is acting equally helpless in Iraq, according to a senior administration official. Commenting on foreign hostile TV broadcasting of anti-American messages into Iraq, the official says, "I can't stop Iranian TV. I wish I could. I can't stop Al-Jazeera. I wish I could."

With that defeatist approach, the United States risks losing the peace in Iraq and handing the country over to the Iranian mullahs and the Wahhabis, critics say. BBG Chairman Tomlinson sees an even larger dimension: a threat to U.S. space dominance. The Telestar-12 incident, he says, "has ominous implications for the future of international satellite broadcasting."

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