

## **The BBC Persian Service 1941-1979**

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*“Since 1932, the BBC has carried the British values of impartiality, integrity, quality and creativity across the world. The BBC’s Global News Division, through the World Service’s 43 language services, funded by an ongoing investment by the Foreign Office; BBC World television, funded by commercial revenue; and the international-facing online sites, together reach over 180 million people every week with a dynamic tri-media offer.” (From BBC’s web site.)*

## **Abstract**

The Persian Service of the BBC WS broadcasts to Iran and also to Afghanistan and Tajikistan where the majority of population speak Persian – referred to as Farsi in Iran, Dari in Afghanistan and Tajiki in Tajikistan. The Iranian Diaspora also received the Persian broadcasts in Short Wave and at times Medium Wave in a variety of European and Middle Eastern countries. Its web page – which began in 1996 – is one of the most visited in Farsi language. However, it was blocked in Iran in January 2006. The BBC's own web page describes the role of language services as follows:<sup>1</sup>

“The Empire Service first broadcast on short wave radio in 1932. Its aim was to develop international communications to Britain's overseas territories. In the run up to World War II, the Foreign Office began funding BBC language services to counter the growing international propaganda of the Axis powers. From its start, the Service's editorial independence from the British government was safeguarded, as it was seen as the cornerstone of the service's credibility and therefore of its impact. After emerging as the leading global broadcaster during the war, BBC World Service was incorporated into the BBC's Royal Charter in 1946.”

The Persian Service radio, originally launched during the final years of the Second World War, has played a major role in relations between the UK and the Persian-speaking world in crucial political conjunctures. During the last 66 years – as funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – many Iranians have viewed the Persian Service with skepticism yet at the same time regarded it as one of the most trusted sources of news and information.

The BBC claims it has kept its independence, strongly guarding its credibility and objectivity. The 1946 broadcasting White Paper, drawn up by the Labor government under Clement Attlee, set out the relationship between government and the BBC, which still exists today. It read:

"The Government intend that the Corporation should remain independent in the preparation of programs for overseas audiences, although it should obtain from the government departments concerned such information about conditions in those countries and

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070123\\_html\\_1930s.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070123_html_1930s.shtml)

the policy of His Majesty's government towards them as will permit it to plan its programs in the national interest."<sup>2</sup>

However, the wording does not set out a clear dividing line about what the BBC can and not say. Research conducted with reference to primary sources and interviews with those who have worked in the BBC Persian service indicates strong pressure from the Government at crucial political conjunctures.

This paper attempts to look at whether the British Government as the provider of funds for the Persian Service has tried to use the broadcasts as a tool for political influence. It will in turn ask whether the Persian Service has -- as part of the BBC's editorial whole -- managed to keep its independence intact in reporting events in a balanced and objective way.

Since tackling the entire history is outside the boundaries of the present paper, selected critical periods are chosen whereby the relations between the Foreign Office and the Persian Service became more intense: the removal of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941; the UK-Iran oil negotiations during 1948-53; the period leading up to Islamic Revolution of 1979. Since the 30 year rule cannot as yet be applied to do the years 1978 and 1979, we can only reach close to the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The research is conducted through three primary sources: interviews with those working with the Persian Service, the archives of the Persian Service broadcasts, and documents of the Public Records Office. The paper has also examined several secondary sources such as books by those directly involved either at the British or Persian Governments or in the BBC. The researcher has herself worked for the BBC Persian Service for over 15 years and some of the accounts are based on primary observations.

This paper will first set the scene as the BBC Persian Service is launched in 1941 and then examine the four named stages with reference to the central questions as outlined above.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070122\\_html\\_40s.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070122_html_40s.shtml)

## Political Background

The BBC entered World War II unsure of its role. Britain was in a state of total war with every resource focused on winning the battle against the Axis powers. BBC archives recounts the story of the first days thus:

“Managers at the fledgling corporation debated whether the BBC should report the conflict objectively - or contribute to the war effort by broadcasting morale boosting propaganda. By the autumn of 1940, Britain was suffering almost nightly bombardment from German planes. On 15 October a delayed action bomb hit Broadcasting House in London. It landed in the music library at 2010 GMT and exploded 52 minutes later, killing seven people. Listeners to the Nine o'clock news heard the announcer pause, and then continue reading.”<sup>3</sup>

In the summer of 1943 the BBC's two "War Reporting Units" – were set up comprising of teams of seven containing a mixture of reporters, producers and engineers. The BBC created the title War Correspondent for Richard Dimbleby who covered World War II in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. In the years that followed war reporting became a specialist skill with new technical equipment and training which was different in nature to the daily news reporting. Reporting needed to take into consideration wartime security and intelligence requirements without being propaganda.

The BBC reinvented itself during the Second World War and public perception of the institution changed dramatically. It more than doubled in size and adopted a new culture and outlook. But the biggest expansion came early in 1940 and 1941, ahead of American involvement in the war, when the outlook for Britain was bleakest. The Government asked the BBC to increase its overseas effort three-fold. A special service for North America was introduced, offering entertainment as well as news of the British struggle. There were services in every major European language, from Scandinavia to the Balkans, plus services for the Soviet Union, Persia, India, Japan and many more. The War proved to be a tough test of the BBC's independence. At times the Government and the military wanted to use the BBC to counter crude propaganda from the Nazis, and there was talk in Westminster of taking over the BBC.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/timeline.shtml>

## 1. The Persian Service & Reza Shah

The BBC's Persian Service was one of these specially created language services when the British Government suspected the Iranian king, Reza Shah Pahlavi, of having sympathies for Nazi Germany. Reza Shah had in 1923 in fact come to power with the support of the British Government but declaring Iran neutral, he declined cooperation in the wartime. This concerned the British Government that he may in fact be taking a pro-Hitler position and could potentially block the Allied efforts in the East.

Reading the correspondence between the British Legation in Teheran and the Foreign Office, it is clear that the war publicity was not working as effectively as might have been expected and many Iranians were also listening to Berlin Radio. The head of British Legation in Teheran, Sir Reader Bullard, often wrote on the subject.

“The success of German Propaganda in Iran and the failure of the British propaganda to make any headway against it have been indicated frequently by the Press Attaché in her reports.”<sup>4</sup>

On 29 December 1939, Sir Reader Bullard had suggested the BBC might have programs in Persian. The Foreign Office responds on 8 February with a positive note from Lacey Baggallay of the Eastern Department:

“You will remember saying in your telegram of 29 December that the Persian Government no longer deprecated the commencement of broadcast in Persian from London...We therefore can ascertain what provisions BBC had made for this eventuality...I understand that Persian has now been moved high up on the list of languages waiting attention and the Treasury will begin financial assistance to BBC in this matter.”<sup>5</sup>

The first idea of an Iranian translator for the post can be seen in a memo on 2 April 1940 when the Foreign Office asks the Legation in Teheran:

“In the event of decision to broadcast permanently in Persian, it may be necessary to engage a second Iranian announcer capable of translating English news bulletins. If so please indicate approximate salary likely to be accepted. Hours of work will be short.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> (7 February 1741/FO371/E382/211/34)

<sup>5</sup> (FO71/E2/2/34/24570)

<sup>6</sup> (FO371/E1484/24570)

It is a Professor Rushbrook Williams who is consulted by the Foreign Office on the arrangements for starting Persian broadcasts from the BBC.

On 13 June 1940 the Foreign Office suggests sending a professional journalist to work alongside the Press Attaché in Teheran, Miss Anne Lambton.<sup>7</sup>

The very first head of the Persian Service is selected by Mr. Stevenson, Head of the Eastern Service of the BBC as registered in the memo from the Foreign Office to Sir Reader Bullard in Teheran:

“Mr. Stevenson of the BBC [director of the Eastern Service] called on the Foreign Office on Friday 9 August to introduce Mr. Gladdening who is to take charge of proposed BBC news broadcasts in Persian. Mr. Stevenson said BBC was proceeding with the recruitment of personnel. A number of Iranian students have already been recruited for translation and Mr. Hamzavi of the Iranian Legation was probably going to take charge of the actual broadcasts.”<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Ministry of Information would be “contributing” to Mr. Hamzavi’s salary. The memo goes on:

“If this was possible, Ministry of Information would definitely make a contribution to Hamzavi’s salary. Mr. Hamzavi had himself undertaken to take leave from the Legation and Mr. Stevenson considered him an ideal man for the broadcasts.”<sup>9</sup>

In the same memo we read that the BBC asks for guidance:

“BBC are anxious to seek our guidance on two points: 1) whether the Minister needs to be present at the inauguration to deliver a message? 2) The BBC would like to be given a line as to what attitude they should adopt in their Persian broadcasts, e.g. what subjects to avoid and what aspects of Iranian life to emphasize.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> (FO 371/E842/2/34-24570)

<sup>8</sup> (FO371/E2426/24570)

<sup>9</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>10</sup> (Ibid)

In a memorandum on 14 August 1940 entitled BBC Broadcasts in Persian, the Foreign Office Eastern Department makes the following points:

“It should in the first place be emphasized that the following suggestions for the guidance of the BBC in the preparation of material for the projected news broadcasts in the Persian language are intended for the use of the regular British officials only and they should not be shown or communicated to any Persian speaking official.”<sup>11</sup>

The suggestions in this memorandum are that:

“It is to be hoped that these new broadcasts will be devoted to the straight news of the world and that, while it is understood that the Ministry of Information will supply news telegrams containing items of more local interest, the broadcasts should as far as possible avoid going into Middle Eastern political questions...if some particular event requires clarifying or explanation, the Foreign Office will always be willing to advise on the commentary which the BBC would wish to add.”<sup>12</sup>

At this stage the request is that Reza Shah should be treated in these broadcasts with due sensitivity and diplomacy because:

“The Shah is not a popular figure but he is still in complete control and is likely to retain power. While gross flattery of his person or his rule should be avoided, he should be presented as an energetic modern-minded ruler, under whose rule Iran has made great economic and cultural progress. Iran’s relations with His Majesty’s Government are excellent. Emphasis might on suitable conditions be laid on the long-standing traditional friendship between the two countries...and care should be taken not to suggest that HM Government has any influence whatsoever on Iranian policy.”<sup>13</sup>

In its very first broadcast on 29 December 1940, Hassan Movaghar-Balyuzi, the new young presenter recruited from Iran follows that line and introduces the BBC broadcasts as the dawning of a new era:

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<sup>11</sup> (FO371/24570)

<sup>12</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>13</sup> (Ibid)

“The BBC Persian Service is aiding a new relationship between the two nations of Britain and Iran”.<sup>14</sup>

In the first few months, BBC Persian Service broadcasts consisted of short 15 minutes news bulletins of war only four nights a week. Abulghassem Taheri, also just recruited from Tehran, reports that the British Press welcomed the opening of the Persian Service as a step towards better relations with Iran.<sup>15</sup>

This line did not last very long. Over 1940-41, the British foreign Office documents reveal that Britain becomes increasingly impatient with Reza Shah over his lack of cooperation over the deportation of some 3000 Germans believed to be resident in Iran. Reza Shah kept on refusing on grounds that the Germans were mainly engineers employed in his modernization program and was refusing to deport them. However British Intelligence had documents revealing that famous German spies, such as Franz Mayer, were working in Iran. Indeed Franz Meyer had described in a letter discovered by British Intelligence that southern mountainous areas of Iran were a safe bastion for German military work:

“This is like a part of Germany or an unassailable allied state behind the enemy’s lines in which you can do anything you wish, train, recruit, and build landing ground, munitions dump and U-boat bases.”<sup>16</sup>

On 7 August 1941, just prior to the Anglo Soviet invasion of Iran Sir Reader Bullard writes in a “Most Secret” memo “Propaganda in Persia”:

“The question of propaganda against the Shah would be completely altered in the case of Russian/British ultimatum, which was to be followed by military action in a few days in the case of non-compliance. To forestall the Germans and make prospect of occupation more palatable we might simultaneously with the ultimatum, release articles and wireless talks about Iran (Persia), referring not only to the good points, but also to the great defects of the present regime, e.g. compulsory acquisition of land at dishonestly low prices, and the enormous cost of living. By then it should be too late for the Shah to throw himself to the arms of the

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<sup>14</sup> (From BBC Persian Service Archives, 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary program made by Shahryar Radpoor.)

<sup>15</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>16</sup> (Sir Anthony Eden to Sir Reader Bullard, 26 June 1941, FO371-35089/E5035.)



Germans, while the army which is anti-Shah would be encouraged to turn against him rather than obey him.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed on 22 August 1941 in a memo BBC Broadcasts in Persian, from Sir Reader Bullard in Teheran to the Foreign Office the BBC line is defined as follows:

“Tribute could be paid to the Shah as a soldier in early days but be hinted that greediness and tyranny have made him a different man...forcible acquisition of land, forced labor, general poverty and corruption, acute shortage of water, Shah’s own wealth and ownership of factories... his monopoly of all prices... his involvement with opium trade... his bad treatment of soldiers... weakness of the political structure...Constitution only in name, a powerless parliament, dictated elections... could be highlighted. Also it could be stressed that England has a democratic Government whereas the Shah, like Hitler, thinks the people are like sheep and are only fit to carry orders blindly.”<sup>18</sup>

Later, after the Anglo Soviet invasion of Iran, the British Foreign Office documents show that the British find it impossible to work with Reza Shah.

“His Majesty’s Government have no wish to interfere unnecessarily in Persian internal affairs but it is clearly difficult for them to operate fully with an administration that had long ceased to represent the wishes of the people.”<sup>19</sup>

BBC Persian Service was then tasked with broadcasting items that revealed Reza Shah’s autocratic style of leadership and encouraged instead a republican system of Government:

“His Majesty’s Government now agreed that the BBC might begin to give various broadcasts in Persian which had been prepared beforehand, starting with talks on Constitutional Government an increasing in strength and color until all Reza Shah’s mismanagement, greed and cruelty were displayed to the public gaze... encouraged by the lead given by the BBC, the deputies in the Majlis, who had been subservient to the Shah for many years,

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<sup>17</sup> (FO371/28914/34/211)

<sup>18</sup> (FO371/211/34/4902)

<sup>19</sup> (Anthony Eden to British legation in Teheran, 9 September 1941, FO371-27213/EP5518.)

passed a resolution asking for reform... a deputation of them was to wait upon the Shah and ask him to abdicate... and within 3 weeks the Shah abdicated.”<sup>20</sup>

[**When** reflecting on the relations between Iran and UK, the head of British legation to Iran, Sir Reader Bullard writes:

“On numerous occasions the Allies were unable to get even their most essential military requirements without the application of the strongest diplomatic pressure and once or twice the virtual threat of force. We were obliged to interfere regularly and radically in the local administration...There were times when we used to wonder whether in the end we might not have to take over the country and run it ourselves.”<sup>21</sup>

Shahrokh Golestan, a well-known film director, says in an interview with the Persian service for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Persian broadcasts:

“I remember vividly that every evening we used to get together with our neighbors to listen to the BBC Persian broadcasts. We all used to sit in a circle in the garden and the radio -- which used to be kept on the second floor -- would be turned towards the garden so we could all hear it. We listened every night, not just to the BBC, but also to Radio Berlin to make sure we didn't miss anything.”<sup>22</sup>

The news bulletin was in fact written by the War Unit of the BBC and translated to Persian and broadcast by the new Iranian recruits. It was direct war reporting in the propaganda style of the day. The pressure by the Government on the BBC World Service broadcasts is reflected in BBC's own account of wartime reporting:

“From the start, there was tension with the government as to how much freedom should be allowed in wartime to the BBC radio news operations and it took time to establish an effective method of working between the BBC and the new Ministry of Information. BBC staff were seconded to the Ministry - and so-called "vigilants"

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<sup>20</sup> (Cited in E.Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, 1982, page 165)

<sup>21</sup> (Sir Reader Bullard to the Foreign Office, “Annual Report for the Year 1942”, FO371—35117/E239/34.)

<sup>22</sup> (BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian Service by Shahryar Radpoor.)

from the Ministry were on permanent duty in the newsroom, often alongside representatives of the services."<sup>23</sup>

Apart from Movaghar-Balyuzi, the first recruits of the BBC Persian Service also included the famous Iranian intellectual, Mojtaba Minovi, who later became a distinguished scholar of Persian literature. Mojtaba Minovi had come to Britain on a study tour, but had stayed on for the fear of persecution in Reza Shah's regime. He taught Persian at Oxford University. Then Massoud Farzaad and a British scholar, Paul Elwell-Sutton were also recruited to strengthen the broadcasts and ensure accuracy of translation. Elwell Sutton had worked for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company AIOC. He later went on to write a passionate account in favor of the oil nationalization by Iran as a lecturer at Edinburgh University where he ended his career as professor of Iranian studies.<sup>24</sup>

An influential politician of the era, Nassrollah Fatemi, recalls in his interview with the BBC Persian Service that Reza Shah viewed the Persian Service with strong suspicion:

“Reza Shah told the acting Foreign Minister, Ameri, that he should listen to how the British were making decisions about his future. Apparently Reza Shah had asked Ameri to listen to the BBC to hear what the British opinion of his monarchy was. “It is saying I will be gone soon,” Reza Shah told Ameri. The same evening the BBC reported: “Reza Khan was brought by us but has now become too arrogant. He has now turned into a dictator who is confiscating public property.” I remember this clearly.”<sup>25</sup>

According to Nassrollah Fatemi, the BBC was giving reports every evening of Reza Shah's cruelties. Abbas Dehghan, another journalist of the first generation BBC reporters told the Persian Service in an interview for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Service that:

“We read exactly whatever we were given to read. We were not allowed to make any changes. There were a couple of English

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<sup>23</sup> (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/aboutbbcnews/spl/hi/history/html/default.stm>)

<sup>24</sup> Hussein Shahidi, The BBC Persian Service –60 years on: September 24, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> (BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian Service by Shahryar Radpoor.)

people who were monitoring what we broadcast. They spoke Persian and they listened carefully.”<sup>26</sup>

By the year 1944, the British Government decided on new, more indirect ways of using the BBC Persian broadcasts:

“These broadcasts carry more weight than statements made in our local broadcasts in Persian and are listened to by a wider audience. This approach would be more effective than supplying the Persian press with material especially prepared for Persian consumption which by the very nature of its presentation is likely to be treated with suspicion.”<sup>27</sup>

The British Foreign Office decided on 10 February 1944 to raise the level of British legation in Teheran to embassy and as a consequence Sir Reader Bullard became the Ambassador. He wrote on 20 June 1944 to all British Councils about a new indirect way of influencing politics in Iran:

“When action is taken by a Persian official as a result of persuasion or pressure by a consular officer, the British delegations should, as far as possible, be kept directly in the background and subordinate officials and the public should be allowed and even encouraged to believe that the Persian official acted on his own responsibility and initiative.”<sup>28</sup>

Earlier, in April 1943, Bullard had already planned a wider propaganda campaign through the extension of the activities of the British Council:

“Cultural propaganda is a field in which we have much leeway to make up in Persia. Persian culture connections have been mainly French... Under the late Shah the activity of the British Council was very restricted...politically the extension of the British Council should be valuable because they give us contact with the younger generation and an opportunity to influence them in the pro-British direction.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> (Sir Reader Bullard to Foreign Office, 9 June 1944, FO371-40194/E3248.)

<sup>28</sup> (Sir Reader Bullard to all Councils in Iran, 20 June 1944, FO37140194/E3596)

<sup>29</sup> (FO371/E2081/38/34)

## 2. The Persian Service and Oil Nationalization

After the war had ended, a period of reform and democratization ensued in Iran and with the departure of Reza Shah; the parliament became increasingly a major centre of decision-making. Political parties were formed each with their dedicated fractions inside the parliament, and often with their own preferences about foreign powers by now constituting the British, the Russians and the Americans. Although the British had their own parliamentary support, they were going through perhaps the worst period of their relations with Iran in as far as being out of favor with the majority of reformists.

Foreign Office documents indicate clearly the tension in diplomatic exchanges and the type of adverse publicity they had to face in the Iranian press. The details are outside the boundary of this research but the main reasons for strong anti-British sentiment included the role they had played in occupying the southern ports in 1940, the removing from power of Reza Shah, but most importantly their constant attempts at blocking the process of nationalization of Iranian oil – a subject very much on the agenda for the reformists and their leader, Dr. Mossadeq.

Throughout the 40's the British Government had problems persuading the Iranian Government to continue with its exceptional concessions on oil to the Anglo Iranian Oil Company. The British were pointing to the agreement which had been signed with the Anglo Iranian Oil Company in 1933 whereby according to article 21: "This Concession shall not be annulled by the Persian Government and the terms therein contained shall not be altered." The reformist movement and the National Front Party of Dr. Mossadeq – by now the Prime Minister of Iran in 1951-- thought otherwise. Mossadeq often referred to a clause in the same agreement that spoke about activities being in the interest of Iran. The National Front newspaper, Keshvar, had a lead article directly addressing the British Prime Minister in the weeks running to the vote on the nationalization of oil:

“How can Mr. Atlee have the right of nationalizing British heavy industries and we cannot have the right to nationalize our oil industry? Mr. Furlong [the British Foreign Office representative visiting Iran at the time] must tell high authorities including Mr. Eden that Persians are no longer prepared to come to any compromise with the Anglo Iranian Oil Company. In fact the company is now detested by the Persian people.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> (FO371/91523, 16 February 1951)

At this stage there is a revealing document relating to the way the BBC was brought in to help. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1951, Mr. Furlong writes to Mr. Serpel at the Treasury and Mr. Butler at the Ministry of Fuel and Power suggesting a BBC talk on the subject.

“Sir Francis Shepherded [of the UK embassy in Teheran] has suggested, and we agree, that it would be useful to inspire the BBC’s Persian Service at this present stage in the oil question...I enclose a draft memorandum bringing out the points we feel can usefully be made in this context. They are cast in such a way that nationalization is not, and cannot be a purely internal Persian problem. They are also designed to show the impracticality of nationalization and the financial and other losses which any such move may involve.”<sup>31</sup>

The memorandum suggests seven lines of argument -- including the financial losses, the harm to Iranian reputation internationally, the adverse effects on the industry -- all of which are later picked up in a BBC talk published three days later on 4 March – just a day before the voting taking place in the parliament. Parts of the talk read as follows:

“In the first place it must be remembered that the Anglo-Iranian oil company has invested vast sums of money...the arbitrary cancellation of the oil Agreement and the failure to honor an international agreement would seriously damage Persian credit and reputation in the world, more so if ... it would be difficult to see how Persia thinks of paying a huge sum to which an international tribunal would certainly consider the company entitled... and there is the company’s expenditure of tens of millions of pounds...”<sup>32</sup>

A report prepared by the BBC for the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee on 13 February 2001 acknowledges that Iranians did not rust the BBC at either conjuncture:

“The BBC Persian Service's broadcasts to Iran started on 28 December 1940 to counter the influence of German Radio in Persian from Berlin. The BBC's initial output was a modest hour per week centered on war news. In 1941, the allies entered Iran and removed from power the then pro-German nationalist Shah, Reza

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<sup>31</sup> (FO371-91523/EP1531/68

<sup>32</sup> [full text in FO371/91524/EP1531/122 Nationalization of Oil by BBC Diplomatic Correspondent]

Pahlavi, replacing him with his young son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The BBC's reports on the Shah's cruelty and corruption were seen as a prelude to his departure. From the very outset, therefore, many in Iran regarded the BBC as an instrument of British imperial involvement. This was particularly true in the case of the young Shah himself. When Britain and the US supported the Shah's coup against the democratically elected Prime Minister, Dr Mossadeq, in August 1953, many nationalists criticized the BBC's broadcasts for playing a key pro-Shah and anti-Mossadeq role.”<sup>33</sup>

The British Government tried to forestall further Mossadeq action by a quick request to the international court of justice in Hague asking for an interim injunction calling upon the Persian Government not to prejudice the position of the AIOC. BBC reporting of Mossadeq’s appeal to the UN against the AIOC angered many Iranians who considered it to be biased. In a memo entitled the “line for News Department and the BBC” on the possible failure of negotiation the British Embassy in Teheran suggests the following points. These points, written out in full detail, were given to the BBC following a briefing at the Foreign Office at 5:30 on 19 March 1953. It included the following lines:

1. Minimum comment
2. Stress that Mossadeq has rejected a fair and equitable settlement
3. Stress that the proposal was Anglo-US
4. Joint work was requested by Mossadeq
5. Mossadeq’s speech offered inaccurate information on compensation figure and revenues
6. No question of undue burden on the economy of Persia
7. No comment on counter proposals
8. Avoid issuing the text of Compensation Agreement...”<sup>34</sup>

Whatever the way this opposition to Mossadeq was conveyed, it seems to have left the impression with many Iranians that the BBC was working in close cooperation with the Government. Abulhassan Bani Sadr, at the time a close advisor to Mossadeq says in a BBC interview broadcast for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Service:

“BBC was the voice of British Imperialism and we did not trust it.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmfaff/80/80ap01.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmfaff/80/80ap01.htm)

<sup>34</sup> (FO371/7188633-EP1531/228)

Shahrokh Golestan says in the same series:

“BBC broadcasts contained frequent attacks on Mossadeq’s Government. The analysis was always one sided. There were two Englishmen who used to write the analysis. I can’t remember their names. They constantly rejected Mossadeq’s policies as being inadequate. I remember that their reports always ended by this sentence: the adverse effects will most probably be for Iran.”<sup>36</sup>

Elwell-Sutton writing in *Persian Oil* also treats the BBC commentary skeptically:

“From London where the BBC had doubled and trebled its transmissions in the Persian language, Persians were told that the British staff [of AIOC] would leave if the company was not given its way. And if this happened the oil industry would collapse. And if the oil industry collapsed, listeners were warned, Persia’s economic system would collapse too.”<sup>37</sup>

Elwell-Sutton adds that Teheran radio was resorting equally to propaganda material attacking the British Ambassador daily. So, emotions were running high on the issue of oil nationalization. It caused splits amongst British writers as well as Iranians. Norman Kemp, who calls himself “a regular Abadan reporter,” says in his book “Abadan” that suddenly there was a surge of journalists going to Iran.

“Colin Reid, Walter Farr and Peter Webb, British United Press reporter, White and myself as regulars from the Abadan corps; soon to be reinforced with Douglas Willis, of the BBC. Alan Clarke of London’s *Daily Herald*, John Fisher of *Kemsley Group*, Bob Long, *Associated Press of America*, Flora Lewis of London’s *Observer* and her husband Sydney Gruson of the *New York Times*, Homer Bigart, Pulitzer-winner of the *New York Herald-Tribune*, Jacques Marcus of the *AFP*, and newsreel cameraman Robert

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<sup>35</sup> BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Persian Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> (L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil, A Study in Power Politics*, Lawrence & Wishard Ltd, 1955, pp241-2)



Hecox were among correspondents who sailed to Abadan during weeks of lax political tension in the capital.”<sup>38</sup>

This sudden surge of adverse international reporting on Mossadeq had its effect on the BBC Persian Service broadcasters. Manuchehr Anvar, one of the Persian broadcasters recalls in an interview with the Persian Service that:

“They always told us what to say and how to say it. When it came to reporting adversely on Mossadeq suddenly for two weeks all Iranian broadcasters disappeared. They had no choice but to bring in English people who spoke Persian, because Iranians had gone on strike. The broadcasts were all in a Persian with a strong English accent.”<sup>39</sup>

A veteran BBC Persian Service broadcaster, Abbas Dehghan, says in his interview with the Persian Service to mark the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian Service that although the broadcasts were mainly translations of British analysis and even the satire and cultural programs were written by the British and translated by the Persian broadcasters, the situation was different when it came to Mossadeq:

“No Iranian was prepared to say anything against Mossadeq. Nobody would be disrespectful of Mossadeq.”<sup>40</sup>

Elwell Sutton takes the side of BBC Persian broadcasters:

“This radio propaganda was every bit as offensive...No wonder the BBC’s Persian announcers on several occasions patriotically refused to speak the lines handed to them! British propaganda services, on instructions from the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office, attempted to whitewash Britain’s record in Persia by plugging the work of British scholars in the Persian language...”<sup>41</sup>

Norman Kemp puts it in a different form but conveys the same:

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<sup>38</sup> (Norman Kemp, Abadan, A first-hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis, first published 1953 by Allan Wingate (Publishers), PP144-5)

<sup>39</sup> (BBC Persian Service Archives, 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the BBC Persian Service, Produced by Shahryar Radpoor)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

“The Company’s [AIOC] information Department was intended to propagate details of its operations and purposes in Iran, a task which achieved indifferent success in overcoming the hurdle of emotional Persian nationalism.”<sup>42</sup>

Norman Kemp in his account of this crisis period how tension between the UK and Iran was seeping down to journalists:

“The British loss in Abadan has been described as “a tragedy of public relations.” The Company had reckoned too much on, and waited too long for, Persian Governments to tell the Iranian people of the AIOC’s offers. Persian journalists, with connivance of their Government, could be scurrilously biased in their invective.... Officially there was no censorship but the Government watched the press dispatches secretly and occasionally was disposed to delay transmission if a piece did not meet with approval. Mossadeq shrewdly divined that by splitting his news sources, he could gain greater publicity for his achievements to the confusion of the journalists.”<sup>43</sup>

He speaks in detail about the technical difficulties of getting news out of Abadan with problems with communication lines, telephones and exchanges and how the press received information.

“There was a pattern for news coverage in Abadan. First a conference with [Eric] Drake, [Oil Board] between nine and ten o’clock in the morning; then we wrote the stories in a small [AIOC] Company office adjoining the administrative block. A Persian staff clerk hired for us a taxi...which was sent to the frontier...local fishermen paddled the copy across the Shatt-el-Arab river at the border ... then another taxi arranged buy AIOC carried it to ... and then to Basra telegraph office. Once we had sent the reports we met the Oil Board... and for greater depths to news reporters interviewed privately the British Government and company officials and the Persian cabinet.”<sup>44</sup>

It is clear from this account that the bulk of information for Western media was provided by the AIOC, the British Government and embassy officials and the Persian press was mainly fed by Iranians officials

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<sup>42</sup> (Ibid p146)

<sup>43</sup> (Ibid pages 146-7)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

thereby causing the split in reporting and the resulting mutual distrust. The BBC Persian Service had both points of view under one roof and this must have been behind the strike by some of the staff. Norman Kemp speaks about the important role that the BBC played in giving information to Iranians.

“The Persian authorities had suspended the Company’s [AIOC] daily newspaper, and each afternoon and evening the oilmen huddled around radio sets to listen to BBC overseas broadcasts for up-to-date information. If Abadan or Teheran were not mentioned in the bulletins the staff was despondent, believing the omission was an augury of defeat.”<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless the pro-nationalization majority did not always trust the Persian Service’s broadcasts. At the height of the crisis, when the US Government begins to mediate between Iran and UK, Hussein Makki, the trusted right hand man of Mossadeq takes the opportunity to attack the British conduct. On 7 August 1951 when as a member of the Oil Board he accompanied the US President’s representative, Averell Harriman, to see the squalid conditions in the Persian oil workers living quarters in Abadan, Makki referred in his speech with suspicion to the BBC.

“Should the Mossadeq Government suffer defeat, Soviet propaganda will convince the people that only with Russian aid can the Iranians succeed. It is in this that the greatest danger lays. The desire of the British capitalist is that nationalization should fail, they are shareholders in the AIOC and they are trying in every possible way and through underhand methods to bring down the Mossadeq Government. This is being done with the aid of the Persian-language broadcasts and the commentaries of the BBC, by inspired and biased articles in the British press...”<sup>46</sup>

In June 1951, while Mossadeq’s Government was preparing to take control of Iran’s oil industry and Britain was once again deploying military force in the Persian Gulf, the Foreign Office gave extra funding for half an hour’s extra broadcast. The British Embassy in Teheran had asked for an extra 15 minutes. This was done in the form of an increase in the evening broadcasts becoming 45 minutes rather than 15 minutes and an additional 15 minutes afternoon broadcast. The latter was then

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<sup>45</sup> (Ibid, p208)

<sup>46</sup> (Ibid, p198)

dropped after 27 August 1951 when Britain had given up plans for the military invasion of Iran.

A report prepared by the BBC for the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee on 13 February 2001 acknowledges that Iranians did not rust the BBC at either conjuncture:

“From the very outset, therefore, the BBC was regarded by many in Iran as an instrument of British imperial involvement. This was particularly true in the case of the young Shah himself. When Britain and the US supported the Shah's coup against the democratically elected Prime Minister, Dr Mossadeq, in August 1953, many nationalists criticized the BBC's broadcasts for playing a key pro-Shah and anti-Mossadeq role.”<sup>47</sup>

### **The Era of Perceived Prosperity**

After the turbulent years of 1951-53, there followed a period of relative calm. The young Shah of Iran, supported by the US and UK, was brought back to the throne. In the years that followed, large US military investment in Iran enabled the Shah of Iran to establish his power by early 60's. In 1963 he embarked on his “White Revolution.”

However, excessive reliance on foreign borrowing to feed the Seven Year Plan for economic development and escalating military expenditure had caused financial crisis forcing Iran to borrow heavily from the IMF, which in turn had asked for reforms in the way of trimming the budget, freezing wage rises and shelving some development projects. This became another cause for tension and opposition, this time led mainly by a powerful clergy but also involving National Front members.

In June 1963 there were massive demonstrations during the holy month of Ramadan led mainly by Ayatollah Khomeini, then 64 years of age. Thousands of shopkeepers, clergymen, teachers, Bazaar merchants and students came out to denounce the Shah. The demonstrations lasted for three days but left hundreds dead. The military kept its loyalty to the Shah and he weathered the storm. The Shah ordered the arrest of National Front members and deported Khomeini to Turkey from where he went to Iraq.

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<sup>47</sup> Appendix 1, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmcaff/80/80ap01.htm>

From the mid-60 to mid-70 the Shah was increasingly regarded as an unrivalled ambitious dictator, a devoted ally of the US and benefiting excellent relations with the international community. Iran was portrayed in the western press as enjoying full prosperity and economic growth. His ambitions took him so far as to begin to plan the well-known costly celebrations of 2500 anniversary of monarchy in Iran. The Iranian Ambassador to the UK, Parviz Radji, writes in the introduction to his book “In the Service of the Peacock Throne”:

“Indeed the Shah saw the 1973 boom in oil prices – for which he was the prime mover – as the moment to realize his grand vision of Iran, as a grand force to be reckoned with economically as well as militarily. Massive expenditure was taken beyond the human or infrastructural capacity of the country. These were the seeds of the gigantic economic dislocation that was to become increasingly apparent after 1976.”<sup>48</sup>

Movements against the Shah were growing both inside Iran and in the West. These included from the most extreme left and underground movements to the religious clergy and the National Front. The International Confederation of Iranian Students had become organized across Europe, especially in France, Germany and in the UK. Shah’s trips to Europe were often an opportunity for the Students Confederation to illustrate its growing power. As such the Shah often faced student demonstrations and personal attacks when he traveled abroad.

Lutfali Khonji, a veteran Persian Service broadcaster who joined the BBC in 1968, says all details of these demonstrations were given in BBC broadcasts and there were no restrictions on reporting anti-Shah slogans in broadcasts despite the amicable relations between the UK and the Shah. He says he never had any personal experience of being told what to say or which line to take although he was one of the main news editors, then known as “program assistant.” But he adds that the program assistant was not writing the original reports, news or analysis.

“News items were -- and still are -- prepared in the Central Newsroom of the BBC and the analysis was written by British reporters. The program assistant only had the task of translating and broadcasting from English to Persian. Amongst the talk-writers were Evan Charlton and Squire Barraclough. If there was

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<sup>48</sup> Parviz Radji, *In the Service of the Peacock Throne*, Hamish Hamilton Publishers 1983, p 8

any pressure to be born, it may have been on Newsroom editors or the so-called “talks writers.” In my experience, the BBC would never impose any line on any of its staff.”<sup>49</sup>

However, individual managers, reporters or analysts could be persuaded to toe a particular line, Mr. Khonji believes. Persuasion rather than force on individuals rather than on the system as a whole is the only possibility of influencing the news and analysis in the BBC according to Lutfali Khonji.

He says that it would be accurate to say that at times of crisis the program durations would always be increased by 15 minutes and with that the budget of the Service would go up. In response to a question about the relative lack of importance of the BBC during the 60’s and early 70’s – when the Shah was most powerful – Khonji says:

“That’s because there was nothing important to report in Iran during the 60’s. Whatever there was to report, was reported -- such as the huge demonstrations against the Shah in Germany in late 60’s or the case of someone standing up in the UN General Assembly in mid 70’s calling the Shah “a murderer.” There was little opposition and thus little newsworthy to report during the years after the US led coup of 1953 through to early 70’s.”<sup>50</sup>

The only unusual incident, according to Mr. Khonji was:

“The Persian broadcasts would always play the Iranian national anthem when it was the Shah’s birthday. This is very unusual for the BBC WS and begs the question why and whether this was to appease the Shah?”<sup>51</sup>

Another veteran broadcaster, Majid Massoudi, says during this period the Shah used to listen to broadcasts and was putting pressure on the BBC.

“Iranian intelligence ministry and other related organizations always listened to our program with diligence. Whenever we said something tiny that they considered anti Iranian they used to complain. We were always under pressure of such criticism.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with M. Torfeh

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> (BBC Persian Service Archive, 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian Service, Shahryar Radpoor.)

Massoudi says inside the Service too, there were discussions about how to refer to the Shah. Some preferred Shahanshah [King of kings], others Alihazrat [His Highness] and others who preferred the Shah.

“There were always discussions on using official titles such as Alihazartat, or Shahanshah, or just saying Iran’s Shah. But this annoyed the Shah to a great extent.”<sup>53</sup>

Khonji confirms the constant pressure put on the BBC by the Shah:

“In Germany in 1968 for 3-4 days there was a lot of anti Shah demonstrations culminating in a huge demonstration in Berlin. We reported all these and the Shah did not like this at all.”<sup>54</sup>

Massoudi says we reported both sides of the story. In 1967 when the BBC Persian service was allowed by the Shah for the first time to send an Iranian reporter, Fazlullah Nikaiin, to report on the celebrations for his coronation, much of his broadcast was an appraisal of the Shah then referred to as Shahanshah:

“I daresay Iranians have never taken part in such a united mass celebrations. Other than the pageantry, these celebrations are for showing gratitude to the crowned leader of Iran, Shahahnshah, in one of the most stable, most important, and most decisive moments of Iran’s history.”<sup>55</sup>

But when a BBC English reporter, John Birdman, went to Iran and portrayed in his report poverty in Iran close to the pageantry, Shah ordered his deportation.

On the other hand the Queen, who had invited the Shah of Iran prior to the celebration of 2500 anniversary of monarchy, she praised him for his role:

“The traditions and culture of your historic land have long been the object of our admiration. Its traditions are exemplified in the coming celebrations of 2500 years of monarchy in Iran.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>54</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>55</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>56</sup> (Ibid)

### 3. The Persian Service and the Islamic Revolution of 1979

The BBC Persian Service rose to unprecedented prominence in the years leading to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Recalling the lead up to the Revolution of 1979, Khonji says:

“At this stage there was a lot to report since opposition was gathering momentum and they were contacting us in the BBC with news. It was not just the Islamic activists but also the National Front and left activists of a variety of colors. They would call us daily giving us details of demonstrations, gatherings and their political statements. So we had a lot to report.”<sup>57</sup>

By this time several new staff was recruited including Baqer Moin who later in 1992 became the first Iranian head of the Service. Shadab Vajdi, Sharan Tabari, Solmaz Dabiri, Fereydoon Jahed and Shahryar Radpoor were amongst other main program assistants.

One of the common assertions amongst Iranians who were anti-Islamic Revolution is that the BBC would tend to be ahead of the news in Iran. It is asserted that the BBC would announce demonstrations before they were announced in Iran. I asked Mr. Khonji why the listeners had such impressions.

Khonji said

“Those working in the BBC had their own set of contacts. I was the main link for the National Front and as such my friends would pass on the relevant news on developments. Improved communications techniques meant that the BBC could be heard far better in Europe and through the BBC broadcasts and the Iranian Diaspora were increasingly involved in the struggle for democracy in Iran. Another element that increased news coverage was that the BBC dispatched several reporters to Iran and thus could report from various corners of the country on developments. That meant the volume of incoming news was suddenly drastically increased. New methods of broadcasting such as interviews were allowed. Despite this there were only a few major interviews and the senior British managers did not feel too happy about these since they could not follow the contents. In the one year leading to the revolution, there was only one interview with Khomeini, three or

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with M. Torfeh



four with Shapur Bakhtiar and two with Abdulkarim Sanjabi, who led the National Front activists.”<sup>58</sup>

Khonji recalls a personal story when with great difficulty he managed to get an appointment for interviewing the leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini.

“At the time interviewing was done with great technical difficulty. We had to book studios and lines. I also had to speak to several contacts before convincing them of the justifications for the interview. Nevertheless, soon after arriving in the studio, Mark Dodd, the head of BBC WS arrived in the studio. I don’t even know who had informed him that I was doing this interview. He barred me from interviewing and said we should not “artificially blowing the events out of proportion”<sup>59</sup>

Mr. Khonji uses this as an example to reject the common belief that the BBC was supporting the Islamic revolution in Iran. However, there is the possibility that Mark Dodd’s assertion was made under pressure from the Iranian Embassy in London, which by then was growing increasingly furious with the BBC broadcasts as we will see below. He recalls that after about three weeks, Mark Dodd did allow the interview with Khomeini but the interviewer was a colleague who was against the Islamic revolution.

The contact that made the interview with Khomeini possible, Abulhassan Banisadr, says that the distrust of the BBC from the old days of the crisis still persisted. He says Khomeini was not at all convinced that he should give the interview to the BBC:

“I suggested to Khomeini to give an interview to BBC assuring him that they will broadcast exactly what he says. Khomeini rejected saying “BBC belongs to the British and it will not benefit us to give them an interview”. I convinced him when I said all the other media you give interviews to, are also all foreign so what is the difference. Khomeini then accepted.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> ibid

<sup>60</sup> (BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor)

Asked about the opinion of staff at the time prior to the revolution, Khonji says it was a true reflection of the Iranian society at home and abroad. He claims about 80% of the staff were supporting the revolution and only 20% were against it. He explains that the reason for the popularity of BBC could have been the following:

1. Communication between the BBC staff and opposition was crucial.
2. Radio Iran was on strike and the BBC became the only source of information.
3. Opposition became far more active than any other time in the history of Iran.
4. Means of communications were far better.
5. BBC itself was by this time far more open to change and open broadcasting with more confidence and a far more assertive position vis-à-vis the UK Government.
6. The force of the movement was creating change inside the Persian Service.<sup>61</sup>

Despite these, Khonji rejects the assertion strongly that the British Government was pro the revolution or used the BBC for furthering that aim. He says there was never any push or force on any member of the staff. Other BBC staff such as Solmaz Dabiri and Shahrar Tabari acknowledges the same.

However, all Iranian supporters of the Shah regard the BBC's role most skeptically. In a revealing account of Shah's perception of events in "The Shah's Story" published in 1980 by Michael Joseph Ltd., he accuses the mass media of playing an important role in the unfolding of events in Iran during the last three years that led to the revolution. He says,

"The composition of journalists in search of ever more sensational news has led to the most regrettable excesses."<sup>62</sup>

He singles out the rise in price of petrol as being the main cause of international anger with his policies:

"I can imagine the anger of the Western motorist whose petrol cost more or for whom there was a shortage. He was told it's the Shah's fault and he believed it."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with M.Torfeh

<sup>62</sup> "The Shah's Story" published in 1980 by Michael Joseph Ltd, p161.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

He even blames Libyan finances for having instigated the student's movement. He says:

“A very active subversive campaign was aimed at our students at home and abroad... I am told that this subversion was subsidized by Libyan funds amounting to 250 million dollars.”<sup>64</sup>

The Shah goes on to blame the BBC in the same tone:

“No less surprising was the BBC's attitude. From the beginning of 1978 their Persian language broadcasts consisted of virulent attacks against my regime. It was as though some mysterious conductor had given the go ahead to these attacks. I am not mentioning the attitude of certain special envoys that caused certain deplorable incidents to be magnified out of all proportion. I am tempted to say that, for some newspapers a dead body is a godsend, and I think that some newsagents must have made a fortune out of the events in Iran.”<sup>65</sup>

The US Ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, records in his book *Mission to Iran*, how the Shah regularly used to complain about the BBC. He says that in August 1978, just a few months before the revolution and during the time of martial law, the Shah became especially suspicious and related BBC broadcasts to the question of oil negotiations between the UK and Iran and claimed they resembled “ancient British subversions” in Iran: Sullivan, William H., “Mission to Iran, WW Norton & company, USA, 1981,

“He [the Shah] pointed out the negotiations with the oil consortium were currently underway and that this gave the British antagonists all the excuses they needed to attempt the resumption of their ancient subversions in Iran. In listening to the BBC broadcasts that were critical of his Government, he was, he said, confirmed in this analysis.”<sup>66</sup>

The Iranian Ambassador to the UK, Parviz Radji, catalogues in his book “In the Service of the Peacock Throne” (Hamish Hamilton Publishers 1983) in his memoirs covering June 1976 to end of January 1979, the number of times meetings took place between him and the Managing Director of BBC External Services as well as Ian Trethowan, the Director

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid (P162)

<sup>65</sup> (Ibid p163)

<sup>66</sup> William H. Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, WW Norton & Co, USA, 1981, pp156-7.

General of BBC and Mark Dodd, Head of BBC's Eastern Service. It is clear from these accounts that the Shah is cabling frequently his anger at BBC Persian Service's reporting. Radji claims that, as the Ambassador he would often try to tone down the anger in Teheran and persuade the Shah that it would not be appropriate to make direct complaints to the BBC, explaining this would make matters worse and give more credit to the BBC. His recollection of a meeting on October 4, 1977 reveals the form of discussions that took place between top BBC officials and the embassy:

“Ian Trethowan, the new Director-General of the BBC comes to lunch bringing with him Gerald Mansell, Robert Gregson and Mark Dodd...Mansell says if a story gets taken up nationally he doesn't see how the BBC can stay out of it. Dodd says BBC needn't stay out of it, but that if they should decide to give the matter coverage, the views of the embassy should also be expressed. I say that's all I ask for. I then say that on my arrival in London, I had found three main problem areas: the BBC, amnesty International and the press.”<sup>67</sup>

Radji illustrates in the account of his meetings that the anger is persistent and as we get closer to the revolution, the matter gets out of hand. According to his account, various members of the Iranian Government who want to express complaints to the BBC are told that the BBC acts independently. They are even frequently taken around to BBC to see how BBC's newsroom operates and how the Persian broadcasters are translating the news. The go-betweens were trying to illustrate to Iranian officials that there can be no Government pressure on the BBC. The account of 19 April 1978 reads as follows:

“The [Foreign Ministers] session breaks up and David Owen walks up to me followed by Khalatbari, who raises the vexed subject of the BBC. He confesses to be puzzled as to why “the BBC is more anxious to broadcast the views of the opponents of your friends than the views of your friends.” The Foreign Secretary laughingly says, “I agree with everything you say, but there isn't anything I can do about it,” again insisting on the BBC's independence from the Foreign Office.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Parviz Radji, *In the Service of the Peacock Throne*, Hamish Hamilton Publishers 1983, p111)

<sup>68</sup> (Ibid, p167)

Later on, Ambassador Radji, also voices his direct complaint. On Wednesday November 29, 1978, he writes in his diary:

“I send off a letter of protest to the BBC in which I say that, being able now to monitor the Persian Service’s transmission, the Embassy is “frankly astonished at the undisguised bias that is an ever-present feature of its broadcasts and the compromising light in which they place the Government effort to restore stability.”<sup>69</sup>

Radji then gives insight into other Iranians of influence who were getting together to put pressure on the BBC’s Persian Service. The next day, Thursday November 30 he writes:

“Seyyed Hussein Nasr, the new head of the Empress’s Private Bureau comes to see me at the office. Although he doesn’t quite say so, I gather he is in London to make use of his university contacts to enlist pressure from academic circles against the BBC.”<sup>70</sup>

Another anti-BBC campaigner is the Iranian millionaire, David Allainace. Radji writes in his memoirs of November 6 1978 that:

“David Alliance, a successful Iranian businessman, now resident in Manchester, comes to tell me that, through his influential contacts in the business community in London, he is bringing pressure on to the BBC to tone down their Persian broadcasts.”<sup>71</sup>

The BBC correspondent in Iran is also put under pressure. On December 1, 1978 Radji write that the Foreign Minister writes to inform him that:

“The BBC representative has been summoned to the Ministry tomorrow to explain his misrepresentation of facts in reporting the money transfers. For your information his expulsion seems probable.”<sup>72</sup>

So, it is clear that official pressure was being put on the BBC Persian Service to tone down its reporting on the events that led to the revolution. However, despite the regular meetings with the Iranian Ambassador and despite their attempts to keep relations with Iranian officials amicable, in

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<sup>69</sup> (Ibid, p 269)

<sup>70</sup> (Ibid, p270)

<sup>71</sup> (Ibid, p252)

<sup>72</sup> (Ibid, p271)

Radji's account of events and meetings there does not seem to be any attempts by the BBC at appeasing the Shah or Iranian officials. BBC standards of journalism are always referred to as being the guide for all broadcasts. Even top British officials such as the Foreign Minister, David Owen, deny they can have any influence over the BBC output as we saw above. Ambassador Radji, who had always tried to keep good relations with the BBC as can be read from his memoirs, shows in his recollection of 28 April 1978 -- when he met Gerald Mansell of the BBC and his colleagues -- why Iranian officialdom was expecting more from the BBC than others:

“I say that what comes out of the BBC, or for that matter other foreign Persian language broadcasts such as those of Radio Moscow, Radio South Yemen, or Radio Iran courier... is nothing to decide the destiny of Iran. There is however, one distinguishing factor about the BBC. While other Persian language transmissions are honest in their desire to see the overthrow of the regime in Iran, the BBC, which is quick to boast its independence and impartiality, remains the broadcasting agency of a country that is a military ally of Iran. It is an agency which is directly financed by the British Government, with the length of each foreign language broadcast determined in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.”<sup>73</sup>

According to the same entry BBC's objective reporting is stressed:

“Mansell reiterates the BBC's impartiality and says there has never been an occasion when only the views of the regime's opponents were given. Statistics are produced to prove the claim to impartiality. Of course they admit mistakes may have been committed, but the BBC cannot engage in a sort of “positive reporting” favored by the Eastern block countries.”<sup>74</sup>

Indeed Radji himself on several occasions had tried to convince the Shah and the Prime Minister, Amir Abass Hoveyda that the BBC reporting was indeed impartial. A few days after Shah's visit to Washington, Radji writes on November 25 1977:

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<sup>73</sup> (Ibid, p173)

<sup>74</sup> (Ibid p 174)

“I send a long and carefully documented cable in reply to an enquiry by Hoveyda, in which I say that, after a thorough examination of the BBC’s coverage of HIM’s visit to Washington, I do not share the opinion that the BBC showed bias or hostility.”<sup>75</sup>

Towards the end of the era of Shah’s rule, anger with the BBC rises almost on a daily basis. BBC’s crucial role in reporting detailed events of the revolution -- as registered in Ambassador Radji’s book -- show clearly that the Shah is much angered by BBC’s reporting that there were two million demonstrators and he particularly dislikes the main BBC reporter, Andrew Whitley, and wishes to serve an expulsion order on him. Radji says he advised against it. Towards the end, for instance on December 19 1978, just two months before the revolution, Radji’s account is revealing about the extent of pressure put on the BBC by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Amir Khosrow Afshar:

“At 11:30 Sir Michael Swann, Chairman of the BBC comes to [Amir Khosrow] Afshar’s suite at Coleridge’s, and the next one and a half hours are devoted to singling out for Sir Michael’s consideration instances, some genuine, others less so, of BBC bias and particularly against the Iranian regime. Sir Michael, a soft spoken, pipe-smoking person of academic appearance, is understandably defensive.”<sup>76</sup>

Only one day earlier, Afshar, in a meeting with British diplomats, had described the BBC “as bad as Radio Moscow.” (p288) Other supporters of the Shah also see a major role for the BBC in bringing the Shah’s government to heel. The German historian William Engdahl describes the role of the BBC in the 1979 revolution as “very similar” to the previous times when it led to the downfall of Reza Shah and then Mossadeq’s government. With this background Engdahl write:

“The British Broadcasting Corporation's Persian-language broadcasts, with dozens of Persian-speaking BBC 'correspondents' sent into even the smallest village, drummed up hysteria against the Shah. The BBC gave Ayatollah Khomeini a full propaganda platform inside Iran during this time. The British government-owned broadcasting organization refused to give the Shah's government an equal chance to reply. Repeated personal appeals from the Shah to the BBC yielded no result. Anglo-American

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<sup>75</sup> (Ibid p125)

<sup>76</sup> (p289)

intelligence was committed to toppling the Shah. The Shah fled in January, and by February 1979, Khomeini had been flown into Tehran to proclaim the establishment of his repressive theocratic state to replace the Shah's government.”<sup>77</sup>

However, during the years that led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the relationship between the BBC Persian Service and millions of pro-revolutionary Iranians changed drastically. BBC Persian Service was now highly trusted and liked by the ordinary people. Gone were the days when the BBC Persian broadcasts were just for intellectuals. Now the BBC had gained mass appeal. The image of the BBC changed in the collective perception of the population. It was no longer the voice of “British Imperialism” but a trusted friend. At home and abroad millions of Iranians were listening to the BBC to find out the latest development. It broadcast details of demonstrations, meetings and opposition statements. It was the first media from which that famous demonstration slogan “death to the Shah” was reported.

BBC World Service has argued openly, especially since the 1990 when it was led by John Tusa that “cultural diplomacy” was an inherently worthwhile activity for the British public service broadcaster to pursue. He insisted also that cultural diplomacy provided by the World Service was exceptionally good value for money. In *Conversation with the World*, John Tusa, then the Director General of the BBC WS pointed out that:

“We have 120 million regular listeners to our broadcasts. There are many millions more who listen to local relays of our broadcasts. At an all-up cost of £120 million in 1988, we deliver our message at a cost of two pence per listener per week every year.”<sup>78</sup>

For John Tusa, one of its most determined defenders, the BBC WS has never been “propaganda”, but journalism equally relevant to populations all over the world, regardless of information environment in their respective societies.<sup>79</sup> And, the BBC WS does not hide the fact that it has to take into consideration Government’s international priorities. It says in its own web site:

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<sup>77</sup> (A Century of War: Anglo-American Oil Politics and the New World Order, pages 171-174, Published by Pluto Press Ltd. 1992 and 2004)

<sup>78</sup> (Cited in: Brian Mc Nair, “News and Journalism in the UK”, pp148-9, Routledge 2003)

<sup>79</sup> (Ibid, p150)



“The Foreign Office funds the BBC World Service. While the World Service has complete editorial and managerial independence, we are able to gain an understanding of the international priorities of the UK Government as one component (though not the sole determinant) of setting our strategy. Therefore, we engage in regular sharing of information with the FCO.”<sup>80</sup>

There is also a more general benefit as defined in the BBC web site:

“At the same time, the BBC is a powerful global showcase for British culture, talent and creativity, through BBC Worldwide, which markets BBC brands, programs and TV channels across the world. It exposes millions of people to the highest quality British entertainment, informational, and educational output. In so doing, it generates both esteem for the UK’s creativity, as illustrated by the dozens of awards and other accolades it receives, and significant financial returns.”

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<sup>80</sup> (The Foreign and Commonwealth Office/BBC World Service Broadcasting Agreement, June 17th 2002)