

THE BBC PERSIAN SERVICE 1941–1979

Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh

The BBC World Service (BBCWS) functions with a deep and intriguing tension at the heart of its activities. Funded directly by the FCO, the BBCWS is subject to the changing priorities and concerns of British foreign policy. However, by 2008, the services themselves have come to operate under the sign of impartiality and distance from direct government influence.

The BBCWS practice of distance from government has emerged over time and not without a struggle to claim and preserve control over the content of its broadcasts. Here we examine a particularly rich vein of BBCWS history, the establishment and development of the Persian language service. This was developed in the epoch of the Empire Service, a time of overt utilization of external radio services as tools of propaganda, and has played a major role in relations between the UK and the Persian-speaking world in crucial political conjunctures. Iranians have both listened to the BBC with scepticism but also regarded the Persian Service as one of their most trusted sources of news and information. The recent 2007 FCO allocation of funds to the development of Arabic television and Persian television reveals how central the Middle East region—and Iran in particular—remains to British political and economic interests.

The paper describes how the BBC Persian Service became involved in three key moments in British–Persian relations and the attempts at political pressure from its own government with which it had to cope. These moments are the removal of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941, the UK–Iran oil negotiations during 1948–1953 and the period leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The analysis of the latter period will be embellished as and when government documents are released under the 30 Year rule. The paper also shows how the relationship between the BBCWS and

Correspondence: Annabelle Sreberny, Centre for Media and Film Studies, SOAS, University of London, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK. E-mail: a.sreberny@soas.ac.uk

the British government was perceived by Iranians and explores attempts by Iranian politicians themselves to influence the BBC. Three primary sources of material have been used, including recent original interviews with many Iranians who have worked with the Persian Service, the archives of BBC Persian Service broadcasts and historical documents in the Public Records Office. This is a preliminary investigation of one particular service, which can contribute to understanding the broader implications of the government–external broadcasting nexus. Further research might compare this particular experience with other language services to determine its specificity and to understand better the range of mechanisms through which influence is brought to bear.

The Empire Service first broadcast on shortwave radio in 1932, its aim being to develop international communications to Britain's overseas territories. In the run-up to the Second World War, the Foreign Office began funding BBC language services to counter the growing international propaganda of the Axis powers.

The BBC entered the Second World War unsure of its role. Britain was in a state of total war with every resource focused on winning the battle against the Axis powers. The BBC Archive timeline 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.¹

The BBC reinvented itself during the Second World War, more than doubling in size and adopting a new culture and outlook. In the summer of 1943, the BBC's two War Reporting Units were set up, comprising teams of seven that contained a mix of reporters, producers and engineers. The title of 'war correspondent' was established for Richard Dimpleby who covered the Second World War in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. In the years that followed, war reporting became a specialist skill that required 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 biggest expansion came early in 1940–1941, ahead of American involvement in the war, when the outlook for Britain was bleakest. The Government asked the BBC to increase its overseas effort threefold. 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 were introduced for the Soviet Union, Persia, India, Japan and 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 even talk in Westminster of taking over the BBC.

The Persian Service and Reza Shah

The government rationale behind the development of the Persian Service was the suspicion that the Iranian king, Reza Shah Pahlavi, was increasingly sympathetic to Nazi Germany. Reza Shah had come to power in 1923 with the support of the British Government. However, declaring Iran neutral, he declined any cooperation in wartime. The British government was most concerned that he might adopt a pro-Hitler position and potentially block the Allied efforts in the East. It was becoming clear that many Iranians were listening to Berlin Radio and that the British war propaganda was not working very effectively.

Already, in December 1939, Sir Reader Bullard, head of the British Legation in Teheran, had suggested that the Iranians would not be entirely opposed to the idea that the BBC might broadcast some programmes in Persian. The Foreign Office responded in February 1940 with a positive note from Lacey Baggallay of the Eastern Department suggesting that the idea was being seriously considered:

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.²

By the spring of 1940, the Foreign Office is asking the Legation in Teheran to find an Iranian translator and suggest 'an approximate salary likely to be accepted. Hours of work will be short.'³ A number of academics were involved in the planning of the service, while many who worked for the service later became academics. Professor Rushbrook Williams was consulted by the Foreign Office on the best arrangements for starting Persian broadcasts and in June 1940, the Foreign Office suggested sending a professional journalist to work alongside the Press Attaché in Teheran, a Miss Anne Lambton, who of course went on to become one of Britain's most notable experts on Iran.⁴

By early 1941, Bullard was urging the Foreign Office to act, reminding them that, '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.'⁵

Issues of language/translation clearly had to be solved and finding appropriate people was not easy. Finally, in August, Stevenson, the director of the Eastern Service informed the Foreign Office that a Mr Gladdening would take charge of the proposed BBC newscasts in Persian, that a number of Iranian students had already been recruited for translation and that Mr Hamzavi of the Iranian Legation was considered an 'ideal man' to take charge of the actual broadcasts.⁶ Thus the initial period of development shows very close communication between the BBC, the Foreign Office and the legation in Teheran. It is also interesting to note that the Ministry of Information would be 'contributing' to Mr Hamzavi's salary, which meant that he would leave the Legation.⁷

Additionally, in August 1940, the Foreign Office Eastern Department had drawn up a paper entitled 'BBC Broadcasts in Persian' which had set out some basic operating procedures for 'the guidance of the BBC in the preparation of material for the projected news broadcasts in the Persian language'. The FOED was at pains to note that these guidelines are strictly 'intended for the use of the regular British officials only and they should not be shown or communicated to any Persian-speaking official'⁸ and suggested 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.⁹

It further suggests that Reza Shah should be treated with due sensitivity and diplomacy in these broadcasts 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.¹⁰

Thus, while 'straight' news is recommended, the propaganda 'spin' is also quite clearly spelled out, including the appearance of BBC neutrality and a stress on the lack of British involvement in domestic Persian politics, a message of vital importance to get across to Iranian listeners. In the first broadcast on 29 December 1940, Hassan Movaghar-Balyuzi, the new young presenter recruited from Iran, followed that line and introduced the BBC broadcasts as the dawning of a new era, claiming that 'the BBC Persian Service is aiding a new relationship between the two nations of Britain and Iran'.¹¹ Abulghassem Taheri, also just recruited from Tehran, suggested that the British Press welcomed the opening of the Persian Service as a step towards better relations with Iran.¹² The short 15-minute news bulletins broadcast four nights a week over the first few months maintained this position.

However, the rhetoric of mutual friendship did not last very long. Britain was becoming 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 refused, arguing that the Germans were mainly engineers employed in his modernization programme while British Intelligence had documents revealing that German spies such as Franz Mayer were working in Iran.¹³

As the conduct of the war became more intense, so too did matters with the BBC. On 7 August 1941, Sir Reader Bullard in Teheran wrote in a ‘Most Secret’ memo entitled ‘Propaganda in Persia’:

The question of propaganda against the Shah would be completely altered in the case of a Russian/British ultimatum, which would be followed by military action in a few days in the case of non-compliance. To forestall the Germans and make the 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 Germans, while the army—which is anti-Shah—would be encouraged to turn against him rather than obey him.¹⁴

On August 22, Bullard sent yet another memo, ‘BBC Broadcasts in Persian’ to the Foreign Office, suggesting what the revised propaganda line should be:

Tribute could be paid to the Shah as a soldier in the early days but it should 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 all 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.¹⁵

After the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, the British found it impossible to work with Reza Shah, Anthony Eden explaining to the Teheran legation that the Government had no wish to interfere unnecessarily in Persian internal affairs but that it was ‘clearly difficult for them to operate fully with an administration that had long ceased to represent the wishes of the people.’¹⁶ Now the BBC Persian Service was tasked with broadcasting more items that revealed Reza Shah’s autocratic style of leadership and that encouraged the formation of 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 and increasing in strength and colour until all Reza Shah’s mismanagement, greed and cruelty were displayed to the public gaze . . .

Abrahamian cites analysis by Sir Reader Bullard’s Annual Report about the political situation in Iran which suggests that, encouraged by the lead given by the BBC, the deputies in the Majlis, who had been subservient to the Shah for many years, passed a

resolution asking for reform; a deputation of them waited upon the Shah and ask him to abdicate, and within three weeks the Shah had gone.¹⁷ Bullard later wrote that

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.¹⁸

The shift in tone of the BBC broadcasts may have helped to produce the desired effect.

Shahrokh Golestan, now a well-known film director, interviewed by the Persian Service for the 65th anniversary of Persian broadcasts, vividly remembered listening to the BBC broadcasts:

. . . 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.¹⁹

The news bulletins were in fact written by the War Unit of the BBC, translated in to Persian and then 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 BBCWS broadcasts is reflected in an internal BBC 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 'vigilantes' from the Ministry were on permanent duty in the newsroom, often alongside representatives of the services.²⁰

Apart from Movaghar-Balyuzi, the first recruits to the BBC Persian Service included Mojtaba Minovi, who had come to Britain on a study tour, but had stayed on for the fear of persecution in Reza Shah's regime. Minovi later taught Persian at Oxford, became a distinguished scholar of Persian literature and gained a reputation as a serious Iranian intellectual. Then Massoud Farzaad and Paul Elwell-Sutton, who had worked for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, were also recruited to strengthen the broadcasts and ensure accuracy of translation.²¹ Abbas Dehghan, another of the first generation of Persian Service reporters describes the way the service functioned, with British personnel monitoring the orientation of output carefully. He recalls that 'we read exactly whatever we were given to read. We were not allowed to make any changes. There were a couple of English people who were monitoring what we broadcast. They spoke Persian and they listened carefully.'²²

Reza Shah viewed the Persian Service with strong suspicion. An influential politician of the era, Nassrollah Fatemi, has recalled that the BBC gave nightly reports of Reza Shah's cruelties, leading Reza Shah himself to tell his acting Foreign Minister, Ameri, that he should listen to the BBC in order to understand British opinion of his monarchy and how the British were making decisions about his future. Fatemi recounts that Reza Shah told Ameri 'the BBC is saying I will be gone soon,' and the same evening the BBC reported that 'Reza Khan was brought by us but has now become too arrogant. He has now turned into a dictator who is confiscating public property.'²³

By 1944, the British Government had decided on new, more indirect ways of using the BBC Persian broadcasts. The FCO recognized that

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.²⁴

In February 1944, the legation in Teheran was promoted to embassy status and Bullard became Ambassador. By April, he had already planned a wider propaganda campaign by extending 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.²⁵

In June, he further detailed the nature of the new, more 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.²⁶

Thus, it was the Second World War that triggered the establishment of the BBC Persian Service under heavy FCO direction. While some of those involved in the Persian Service wish to arrogate a strong role for the broadcasts in the downfall of Reza Shah, this is neither endorsed nor challenged here, where our focus is simply on the changing role of BBCWS Persian and its relationship with the British government and not an assessment of its effectiveness. Yet evidence suggests both that Reza Shah himself was listening and considered the Persian Service to be the voice of the British

government and that the direction of popular change moved in ways that the British wanted and had directed the Persian Service to endorse.

The Persian Service and oil nationalization

After the war, a softer, more indirect mode of control was gradually established and the BBC alongside the British Council became located within an emerging framework of 'cultural propaganda' that was later to be reconfigured as 'public diplomacy'.

After emerging as the leading global broadcaster during the war, the BBCWS was incorporated into the BBC's Royal Charter in 1946.²⁷ From the start, there was an attempt to safeguard the Service's editorial independence from government, since this was seen by the broadcaster as the cornerstone of the service's credibility and therefore of its impact. The 1946 Broadcasting White Paper, developed by the coalition government yet proposed finally by Attlee's Labour government, set out the relationship between government and the BBC, which still pertains today. It reads:

The Government intends 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 the policy of His Majesty's government towards them as will permit it to plan its programs in the national interest.²⁸

However, the wording does not set out a clear dividing line about what the BBC can and not say, nor how the various language channels both remain independent yet also programme in 'the national interest'.

In Iran after the war, a period of reform and democratization ensued. Reza Shah was removed and the parliament became a more major centre of decision-making. Political parties were formed, each with their dedicated fractions inside the parliament and with their own preferences as to which foreign power—the British, Russian or growing American presence—might best serve the needs of Iran. Although the British had their group of parliamentary supporters, they fell rapidly out of favour with the majority of reformists lead by Mossadeq because of the growing confrontation over the nationalization of Iranian oil.

Throughout the 1940s, the British Government had problems persuading the Iranian Government to continue with its exceptional concessions on oil extraction with the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The British pointed to Article 21 of the 1933 agreement signed with the AIOC, which stated that the concession could not be altered or annulled by the Persian Government. The reformist movement and the National Front Party of Dr Mossadeq, Prime Minister of Iran from 1951, thought otherwise, often referring to a clause in the same agreement that spoke about activities being in the 'national interest of Iran'. An example of the anger and disaffection with the British can be found in a lead article in the National Front

newspaper, *Keshvar*, that directly addressed the British Prime Minister just before the vote on the nationalization of oil:

How can Mr. Attlee 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 the 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.²⁹

A revealing document shows the way the BBC was brought in to help. On 1 March 1951, Furlong wrote to Mr Serpel at the Treasury and Mr Butler at the Ministry of Fuel and Power suggesting a BBC talk on the subject of oil:

Sir Francis Shepherd [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.³⁰

The memorandum suggests that seven lines of argument be proposed, including a focus on financial losses, the harm to Iranian reputation internationally and the adverse effects on the industry as a whole. Three days later, on 4 March and just a day before the vote in the Majles, all these points were articulated in a BBC Persian Service broadcast. The talk argued that

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... 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...³¹

The British Government tried to forestall further action by Mossadeq by asking the International Court of Justice in The Hague for an interim injunction calling upon the Persian Government not to prejudice the position of the AIOC. The British Embassy in Teheran, concerned about the possible failure of negotiations, developed an appropriate 'line for News Department and the BBC'. Its points, written out in full detail, were given to the BBC following a briefing at the Foreign Office on 19 March 1953, and included the following lines:

1. Minimum comment
2. Stress that Mossadeq has rejected a fair and equitable settlement

3. 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.³²

Of course, these were exceptional circumstances, with the British government set to lose face internationally, undertake an ignominious retreat from southern Iran and having to cope with the consequent loss of revenue. However, they do indicate clearly that at times of foreign policy tension, the BBC Persian Service has been called upon in very direct ways to broadcast in support of governmental objectives and that the content of broadcasts has been dictated from without.

This period of broadcasting also left many Iranians with the impression that the BBC was working in close cooperation with the British Government. Abulhassan Bani Sadr, at the time a close advisor to Mossadeq, has claimed quite simply, in a BBC interview broadcast for the 65th anniversary of the Service, that the ‘BBC was the voice of British imperialism and we did not trust it.’³³ Shahrokh Golestan, interviewed for the same programme, said that BBC broadcasts contained frequent attacks on Mossadeq’s Government, adding ‘I remember that their reports always ended by this sentence: “the adverse effects will most probably be for Iran.”’³⁴

Elwell-Sutton, in his book *Persian Oil*, mentions the role of BBC broadcasts in persuading Iranians not to support oil nationalization:

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.³⁵

He adds that Teheran radio also resorted to propaganda material attacking the British Ambassador daily. Norman Kemp, who called himself ‘a regular Abadan reporter,’ wrote 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 Hecox were among correspondents who sailed to Abadan during weeks of lax political tension in the capital.³⁶

This sudden surge of adverse reporting on Mossadeq had its effect on the BBC Persian Service broadcasters. Some personnel simply went awol. Anvar, a Persian broadcaster, recalls that ‘when it came to reporting adversely on Mossadeq suddenly for two weeks

all Iranian broadcasters disappeared. The BBC had no choice but to bring in English people who spoke Persian, because the Iranians had gone on strike. The broadcasts were all in a Persian with a strong English accent.’³⁷ Another veteran broadcaster, Dehghan, has noted that broadcasts were mainly translations of British analysis and even the satire and cultural programmes were written by the British and translated by the Persian broadcasters. But the situation was different when it came to Mossadeq, since ‘no Iranian was prepared to say anything against Mossadeq. Nobody would be disrespectful of Mossadeq.’³⁸

Elwell-Sutton was sympathetic to the strike action, writing that

this radio propaganda was...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...³⁹

Kemp’s account of this crisis period shows how tension between the UK and Iran was seeping down to journalists and he describes in detail the technical difficulties of getting news out of Abadan. He wrote

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 by 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.⁴⁰

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 while the Persian press was mainly fed by Iranians officials, thereby causing some split in reporting and the resulting mutual distrust. At such a crisis point, it was difficult for the Persian Service to maintain both points of view and some of the Persian staff opted to strike. And yet 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.⁴¹

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, attacked the British conduct and specifically mentioned the BBC. In August 1951, when as a member of the Oil Board he accompanied the US President's representative, Averell Harriman, to see the squalid conditions of the living quarters of the Persian oil workers in Abadan, Makki referred 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 . . . ⁴²

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 an half hour additional broadcast to Iran, although the embassy in Teheran had only asked for an extra 15 minutes. The evening broadcasts was lengthened and an additional 15 minutes afternoon broadcast added, although the latter was dropped after 27 August 1951 when Britain gave up its plans for the military invasion of Iran.

Despite relying on the factual information it provided, many Iranians considered the BBC to be the voice of the British government and as such considered it to be highly biased against Mossadeq. Some decades later, in February 2001, a report prepared by the BBC for the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee acknowledged that Iranians did not trust the BBC at either of the two conjunctures discussed so far:

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 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. ⁴³

Of course, oil was nationalized and the British packed their bags and left. Yet subsequently the democratic nationalist movement of Mossadeq was squashed and in 1953, a coup engineered by the British and the Americans returned the son of Reza Shah to the throne.

Perceived prosperity and Pahlavi pressures: the period before the Revolution

After 1953, US military investment in Iran enabled the Shah of Iran to re-establish his power and 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 caused a financial crisis, forcing Iran to borrow heavily from the IMF, which in turn asked for reforms that included 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. 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 on to Najaf in Iraq.

Through to the late 1970s, the Shah was regarded internationally as an unrivalled and ambitious dictator, a devoted ally of the US and as enjoying excellent relations with the international community. Iran was portrayed in the western press as enjoying prosperity and economic growth and the Shah staged the extravagant celebrations of the 2500 anniversary of monarchy at Persepolis in 1971. But movements against the Shah were growing inside Iran and amongst Iranians abroad. These included leftist and underground movements as well as the clergy and the remnants of Mossadeq's National Front. The International Confederation of Iranian Students organized across Europe and the Shah's visits to Europe were often an opportunity for the Confederation to demonstrate its growing power.

Lutfali Khonji, a veteran Persian Service broadcaster who joined the BBC in 1968, said in a recent interview that during this period full details of these demonstrations were given in BBC broadcasts and there were no restrictions on reporting anti-Shah slogans despite the amicable relations between the UK and the Shah. 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 a 'programme assistant'. However, he noted that the programme assistants did not write the original reports, news or analysis. Rather news items were prepared in the central newsroom of the BBC and the analysis was written by British reporters so that programme assistants only had the task of translating from English to Persian and broadcasting. Khonji said that if there was any pressure to be born, it may have been on newsroom editors or the so-called 'talks writers' but that in his experience 'the BBC would never impose any line on any of its staff.'⁴⁴ However, he did believe that individual managers, reporters or analysts might be persuaded to toe a particular line. For him, persuasion on individuals rather than force on the system as a whole was the only possible way of influencing the news and analysis in the BBC.

He says that at times of crisis, the budget of the Service would go up and programme durations would be increased. In response to a question about the relative lack of importance of the BBC during the mid-1960s to late 1970s—when the Shah was most powerful—Khonji responded

that's because there was nothing important to report in Iran during the 1960s. Whatever there was to report, was reported—such as the huge demonstrations against the Shah in Germany in the late 1960s or the case of someone standing up in the UN General Assembly in mid-1970s 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 1970s.⁴⁵

The only unusual practice, according to Khonji was that 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 of whether this was to appease the Shah?'⁴⁶

Another veteran broadcaster, Majid Massoudi, suggested that during this period the Shah used to listen to Persian Service broadcasts and frequently tried put pressure on the BBC:

The 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.⁴⁷

He also said that inside the Service there were discussions about how to refer to the Shah, with some Iranians preferring to use *Shahanshah* [King of kings], others *Alihazrat* [His Highness] and others who preferred simply *Shah*.

Khonji confirmed the constant pressure put on the BBC by the Shah: 'In Germany in 1968 for 3–4 days there were 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.'⁴⁸

Massoudi says the BBC Persian Service used to report different sides of the Iran story. He alluded to the fact that 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 a positive appraisal of the Shah:

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, Shahahshah, in one of the most stable, most important, and most decisive moments of Iran's history.⁴⁹

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

The Persian Service and the Islamic Revolution of 1979

The BBC Persian Service rose to unprecedented prominence inside Iran 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 the 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 colours. They would call us daily giving us details of demonstrations, gatherings and their political statements. So we had a lot to report.⁵⁰

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 other important programme assistants.

A common assertion made by pro-monarchist Iranians was that the BBC would tend to be ahead of the news in Iran, announcing demonstrations before they happened. Khonji response to this idea by saying

those working in the BBC had their own set of contacts. Baqer Moin had close contacts with the Islamic scholars and activists and 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 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 four with Shapur Bakhtiar and two with Abdulkarim Sanjabi, who led the National Front activists.⁵¹

But Khonji also recalls the great difficulties, both technical and political, in trying to interview Ayatollah Khomeini that suggest a less sanguine view of BBCWS pressure:

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 be artificially blowing the events out of proportion.⁵²

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. He recalls that after about three weeks, Mark Dodd did allow the interview with Khomeini but Khonji was not the one to do it.

Some of the difficulty in arranging an interview with Khomeini was because distrust of the BBC still persisted and Khomeini was not at all convinced that he

should give the interview. Abulhassan Bani-Sadr, the contact who finally made the interview possible, says that

I suggested to Khomeini to give an interview to the 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.⁵³

The Shah himself accused the mass media of playing an important role during the last three years that led to the revolution, arguing that 'the competition of journalists in search of ever more sensational news has led to the most regrettable excesses.'⁵⁴ He singled out the BBC for particular comment:

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.⁵⁵

The US Ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, records in his book *Mission to Iran*, how the Shah regularly used to complain about the BBC. Sullivan describes how in August 1978, just a few months before the revolution and during the time of martial law, the Shah became especially suspicious and claimed that BBC broadcasts were formenting opposition:

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.⁵⁶

The Iranian Ambassador to the UK, Parviz Radji, describes the many meetings held in the late 1970s between himself, the Managing Director of BBC External Services as well as Ian Trethowan, the Director General of BBC, and Mark Dodd, Head of BBC's Eastern Service. It is evident that the Shah frequently cabled his anger at BBC Persian Service reporting. Radji claims that he tried to tone down the anger and persuade the Shah that it would not be appropriate to make direct complaints to the BBC, explaining that this would make matters worse and give more credit to the BBC. His recollection of a meeting on October 1977 reveals the kind of discussion 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.⁵⁷

Radji tried to get Iranian officials to understand that there could be no Iranian government pressure on the BBC, that the BBC acts independently, and even took Iranian officials around the BBC to see how the newsroom operated and how the Persian broadcasters translated the news. Radji's account of one particular meeting makes this point clearly:

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.⁵⁸

But by November 1978, as the opposition crescendoed inside Iran, Radji himself made a direct complaint, sending a letter of protest to the BBC that 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.'⁵⁹ He describes other influential Iranians who also tried to put pressure on the Persian Service, including Seyyed Hussein Nasr, the new head of the Empress's Private Bureau, who used his university contacts as well as the Iranian millionaire, David Alliance, who used influential contacts in the business community in London to pressure the BBC to tone down their Persian broadcasts.⁶⁰

Radji's explanation as to why Iranian officialdom expected more from the BBC than other media organizations, reveals the dilemma that the BBCWS faces amongst its listeners:

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.⁶¹

As the popular movement in Iran gained momentum, the Shah's anger with the BBC's detailed coverage of events increased. He particularly disliked the main BBC reporter, Andrew Whitley. In December 1978, the BBC representative was summoned to the Foreign Ministry 'to explain his misrepresentation of facts' in reporting the money transfers being made out of Iran and that his expulsion seemed probable.⁶²

That did not actually happen. But the pressure put on the BBC by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Amir Khosrow Afshar, increased. Radji writes of a meeting in December 1978:

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.⁶³

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. The BBC Persian Service was now highly trusted and liked by ordinary people. Gone were the days when the BBC Persian broadcasts were considered just for intellectuals. The BBC had gained mass appeal and its image 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 developments. It broadcast details of demonstrations, meetings and opposition statements. It was the first channel from which that famous demonstration slogan 'death to the Shah' was reported. A cartoon showed a man walking into an electrical hardware shop to 'buy a radio BBC'.

It is clear that considerable Iranian 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 attempts to keep relations with Iranian officials amicable, there is no evidence of any attempt by the BBC to appease the Shah or Iranian officials. BBC standards of journalistic independence were always referred to as being the guide for all broadcasts. Even a British official such as the Foreign Minister, David Owen, laughs away the notion that he could have any influence over the BBC output.

In 2008–2009, major documents will be released under the 30 Year rule and a fuller story can be written about the revolutionary period itself and its aftermath. The BBC's relationship with the Islamic Republic has been complex and not an easy one. As of June 2008, access to BBC On-Line is filtered and the planned BBC Persian television channel has not been given permission to run an office in Teheran.

The self-narrative of the BBCWS has altered over the past 75 years, to inhabit a more overt role in 'cultural diplomacy' but perhaps maintaining more strongly than ever the line of editorial and managerial distance from government.

This article has explored three moments in the evolution of the current position of 'editorial and managerial independence', as this pertains to the history of one specific country and one language service. The dynamics have evolved from overt government direction to more arms-length framing to a laughing recognition by a senior minister of the difficulty of influencing broadcast output, and yet the perception by the current Iranian regime of government–broadcaster collusion is perhaps stronger than ever. The precise mechanisms of influence of the earlier periods are traceable through government and broadcaster archives, the historic documents

clearly revealing the relationships between the Embassy in Teheran, the ministries and the BBCWS management. The more recent period remains allusive to pin down, especially since employees all disavow even any attempts at influence and much of the formal paperwork is not yet released. That the story has changed over time is clear but so too is the fact that this story is not over; not at all.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/timeline.shtml>.
- 2 Foreign Office 71/E2/2/34/24570/Public Records Office, London.
- 3 FO371/E1484/24570/PRO.
- 4 FO 371/E842/2/34-24570/PRO.
- 5 FO371/E382/211/34/24570/PRO.
- 6 FO371/E2426/24570/PRO.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 FO371/24570/PRO.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th Anniversary produced by Shahryar Radpoor, an internally authorized account of the period.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 FO371-35089/E5035/PRO: Sir Anthony Eden writes to Sir Reader Bullard, 26 June 1941, saying that in a letter discovered by British Intelligence, Mayer was found to have written that the southern mountainous areas of Iran were a safe bastion for German military work, claiming that it '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.'
- 14 FO371/28914/34/211/PRO.
- 15 FO371/211/34/4902/PRO.
- 16 FO371-27213/EP5518/PRO Anthony Eden to British legation in Teheran, 9 September 1941.
- 17 Cited in E. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), 165.
- 18 FO371/35117/E239/34/PRO: Sir Reader Bullard to the Foreign Office, 'Annual Report for the Year 1942'.
- 19 BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th anniversary of the Persian Service produced by Shahryar Radpoor.
- 20 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/aboutbbcnews/spl/hi/history/html/default.stm>.
- 21 Hussein Shahidi, *The BBC Persian Service—60 years on*, September 24, 2001.
- 22 BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th Anniversary of the BBC Persian Service: produced by Shahryar Radpoor.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 FO371-40194/E3248/PRO: Sir Reader Bullard to Foreign Office, 9 June 1944.
- 25 FO371/E2081/38/34/PRO.
- 26 FO37140194/E3596/PRO: Sir Reader Bullard to all Councils in Iran, 20 June 1944.
- 27 www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070123_html_1930s.shtml.

- 28 http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070122_html_40s.shtml.
- 29 FO371/91523/PRO.
- 30 FO371-91523/EP1531/68/PRO.
- 31 Full text in FO371/91524/EP1531/122/PRO: Nationalization of Oil by BBC Diplomatic Correspondent.
- 32 FO371/7188633-EP1531/228/PRO.
- 33 BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th Anniversary of the Persian Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics* (Lawrence & Wishard Ltd, 1955), 241–242.
- 36 Norman Kemp, *Abadan, A First-hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis*, (London, first published in 1953 by Allan Wingate), 144–145.
- 37 BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th Anniversary of the BBC Persian Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 L.P. Elwell-Sutton, 146.
- 40 Norman Kemp, 146.
- 41 Ibid., 208.
- 42 Ibid., 198.
- 43 www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmcaff/80/80ap01.htm.
- 44 Interview with M. Torfeh.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 BBC Persian Service Archive, program for the 65th anniversary of the Persian Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor.
- 48 Interview with M. Torfeh.
- 49 BBC Persian Service Archive, program for 65th anniversary of the Persian Service, Produced by Shahryar Radpoor.
- 50 Interview with M. Torfeh.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th anniversary of the Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor.
- 54 Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The Shah's Story* (London, Michael Joseph Ltd, 1980), 161.
- 55 Ibid., 163.
- 56 William H. Sullivan, *Mission to Iran* (New York, WW Norton & Co, 1981), 156–157.
- 57 Parviz Radji, *In the Service of the Peacock Throne*, (London, Hamish Hamilton Publishers, 1983), 111.
- 58 Ibid., 167.
- 59 Ibid., 269.
- 60 Ibid., 252.
- 61 Ibid., 173.
- 62 Ibid., 271.
- 63 Ibid., 289.

Annabelle Sreberny is Professor of Global Media and Communication, and Director of the Centre for Media and Film Studies at SOAS. She has been working on issues around Iranian media since before the revolution, and her work includes the book *Small Media, Big Revolution*.

Massoumeh Torfeh was a senior producer in the BBC Persian Service. She is currently a Research Associate in the Centre for Media and Film Studies, SOAS, specializing on Iran, Afghanistan and Tadjikistan.
