

## **The BBC Persian Service and the Islamic Revolution of 1979**

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In the recent political crisis in Iran that followed the contested presidential elections of 12 June, 2009, BBC Persian television (henceforth BBCPTV) that had started in January that year was singled out by the regime in Tehran as one of the main causes for blame.

The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (in a speech on 19 June) called Britain the “most malicious” of western powers. He said that Britain had tried to instigate demonstrations and create political crisis through the use of the BBC. The next day supporters of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had claimed victory in the election, poured out in the streets carrying banners saying: “BBC Persian, against our popular government”. They demanded that the BBC office and the British embassy in Tehran should both be closed down. BBCPTV has not been allowed to establish a bureau in Tehran since its start in January 2009, but the BBC correspondent in Tehran, Jon Leyne, and BBC’s World Affairs Editor, John Simpson, were both told to leave Iran immediately. In the following days the exchange of expulsions of diplomats (two each) and the arrest of 19 Iranian staff members of the British embassy in Tehran ensued. Later in August the chief political analyst in the British embassy was taken to a political court accused of spying for Britain and, through forced confessions, he was made to apologize.

The London mayor, Boris Johnson, writing in the web comment page of the Telegraph 22 June posed the question, “Can the Ayatollah possibly be right?” and then answered:

“Well, yes he is, partly, in the sense that the BBC's Persian service has had a big influence on the demonstrations, supplying the kind of critical and impartial commentary that the regime would never normally allow. This ayatollah's curse is a vindication of the BBC, and the principle of taxpayer-funded broadcasting.”

This was not the first time that the BBC Persian Services have been singled out for blame by Iran. Ayatollah Khamenei, a member of the Islamic opposition during the reign of the former Shah of Iran, must remember that during the Iranian revolution of 1979, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi also blamed BBC Persian – then only a radio service - for instigating the revolution. BBC Persian Service radio, (henceforth BBCPR) funded by the Foreign Office, reported on the opposition movement that was growing against the Shah, who found it impossible to believe that the British Government could not control the BBC and thus must favour the formation of an Islamic state. Accused by some of actually fomenting protest, the BBC has long maintained its objectivity and neutrality in the face of various pressures, in 1979 and in 2009 alike.

In January 2009, the Foreign Office released - under the thirty year rule - many documents pertaining to the last year of the revolution. They, and other documents in the BBC Written Archive, allow for a serious scrutiny of the complicated relationship between the FO and the BBC in relation to Iran.[\[1\]](#) This analysis might lay to rest some of the more elaborate but erroneous imaginings about the role of the BBC, although the most extreme of Iranian conspiratorial imaginings are rarely dampened

by lack of evidence. While BBCPS, as all of the World Service, is financed by the Foreign Office as part of British long-term strategic goals in the region, BBC journalism did not always go the way the Foreign Office might have preferred. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that the BBC didn't always play the paymaster's tune. This paper explores this delicate dance between the FCO and the BBCPS over this tumultuous year and analyses the impact it had, and has, on the relations between Iran and Britain.

### **BBC Persian radio and the mobilization of 1978-9**

In the early 1970s, the Shah was regarded internationally as an unrivalled and ambitious dictator, as a devoted ally of the US and as enjoying excellent relations with the international community. Iran was seen as enjoying prosperity and economic growth as the Shah staged the extravagant celebrations of the 2500 anniversary of the Iranian monarchy at Persepolis in 1971. To avert political change, he himself introduced the so called "White Revolution", an ambitious program of land reform, and set up his own political party, Rastakhiz, which had compulsory membership and dues,. Both of these created tension and dissent. During the late 1960s the Shah had become increasingly dependent on the secret police (SAVAK) in controlling those opposition movements critical of his reforms. The combination of SAVAK monitoring internal dissent and a vast army equipped with ultramodern weapons looking outwards, in the mid-1970s the Shah's regime appeared durable. Despite endemic corruption and complex economic problems it was appeared that the regime was indestructible.

However, movements against the Shah were gathering momentum inside Iran and amongst Iranians abroad. These included armed uprisings and underground movements inside Iran as well as the movements of the disenchanting clergy and the liberal nationalist movement, the National Front. The International Confederation of Iranian Students in Europe and the US often organized successful demonstrations during the Shah's visits abroad to unmask his claim to popularity. At the same time the gradual rise in the price of oil through the 1970s led by the Shah through the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) angered the West while the parlous state of human rights began to gain international attention.

But suddenly the Shah's fortunes changed in just over two years A string of demonstrations, strikes and mass protests at home and protests abroad gained international attention. The BBC Persian Service, hitherto regarded as unimportant, rose to prominence during 1977-79. Iranians had become avid listeners and especially in from 1977-8, the BBC was no longer the limited domain of intellectuals and the upper classes. People from different backgrounds listened to the BBC as well as other radio channels available on short-wave, which were useful counterweights to the state-run radio and television network in Iran. BBCPS broadcasts became a trusted medium for news and information by Iranians at home and in the diasporas, mainly because it was the medium where the voices of opposition could be frequently heard.

### **BBCPS after 1977**

Thus during 1977-8 the BBC became a major thorn in British relations with Iran. The Shah eventually described the BBC as his "number one enemy".<sup>[2]</sup> Through his

meetings with the British Ambassador in Tehran, Anthony Parsons, through messages carried by the Iranian Ambassador in London, Parviz Radji, and by sending several high level delegations - including his sister Princess Ashraf - from Tehran to London, the Shah made his complaint about the BBC heard by Downing Street and the FCO.

Sir Anthony Parsons, the British Ambassador in Tehran, wrote regularly to the FCO about the Shah's complaints, going as far as to question the viability of the BBC if it was having such an adverse effect on British relations with one of its most trusted allies. In fact as early as August 1976 Parsons began warning the British Government that British interests should dictate British policies and "we only succeed in damaging these interests if we adopt public attitudes which are at variance with our policies."<sup>[3]</sup> Most reports from Parsons reveal that he supported the Shah, viewed the BBC as having little real influence in Iran and as such, considered it relatively unimportant for effecting British foreign policy. He regards the Persian Service of the BBC as "very largely a waste of time and money" and that he scarcely meets any Persians who listen to it and if they do, they regard it with suspicion. Parsons repeats his disbelief that the Persian Service "does a positive service to British interests in Iran."<sup>[4]</sup>

The FCO challenged Parson's position. Nicholas Barrington from the Guidance and Information Department at FCO wrote back "I hope you don't mind my saying that I was slightly surprised by the strength and monolithic nature of your views". He argued that the BBC would see in them an example of "the FCO's concern with short term expediency which they find inhibiting to much longer term aims."<sup>[5]</sup> Barrington explained that the rationale behind foreign language broadcasting was "to operate in the medium and long term, influencing those who may one day form an alternative government". He asks, "is there not some national interest" in making the Iranians "accustomed and sympathetic to Western democratic traditions, particularly when the opposition has no local voice?"<sup>[6]</sup>

But there were clear differences of approach within the FCO. A "confidential" account of the minutes of the BBC Board of Governors meeting held in July 1976 confirms that, for the first time, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was actually considering abolishing the Persian Section due to mounting pressure from Iran:

"The Shah's objections had led to exchanges between the British Ambassador in Tehran and the FCO, as a result of which the FCO had set up a small official working party to see whether the Persian Service should be altered or abolished. This was the first time in the Director-General's experience that the FCO had seemed prepared to consider altering or abolishing a language service because it was causing embarrassment."<sup>[7]</sup>

The working party was set up officially to consider whether the Persian Service "should be altered in any way or abolished altogether."<sup>[8]</sup> On 15 July 1976, M, Kendall of the Guidance and Information Department at the FCO, who was asked to conduct the review, wrote to the BBC's head of Eastern Service, Mark Dodd, spelling out the terms of reference for the review of the service: "To examine the benefit to the [British] national interest of the Persian Service of the BBC as an instrument in the overseas information program and to make recommendations for its continuation, modification or abolition."<sup>[9]</sup>

In submitting the Terms Of Reference, the FCO clarifies that the use of “national interest” had been taken deliberately from the License and Agreement, since that and no other document expressed the BBC’s “constitutional requirements”.<sup>[10]</sup> The License And Agreement was written on 7 July 1969 and has as its final phrase the reference to “national interest”:

“The Corporation shall consult and collaborate with the Department so specified and shall obtain and accept from them such information regarding conditions in, and the policies of HMG aforesaid towards, the countries so prescribed and other countries as will enable the Corporation to plan and prepare its programs in the External Services in the national interest.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Put simply, BBC external services should consult with the relevant FCO department on matters that could affect British national interests.

However, the BBC was also pushing for its own expertise in design and production of its programmes. When the review of the Persian Service by Anthony Parsons was sent to Mark Dodd in 1976, he hit back with anger saying that “assaults” on the Persian Service from the British Embassy in Tehran were “nothing new”. Dodd said that he was at a loss to know what Sir Anthony meant by the ‘Persian Service tends to be regarded as propaganda’, and asks ‘propaganda for whom?’ Dodd then criticizes the ambassador directly:

“The term in which Parsons discusses the BBC’s role suggests that he has no understanding or appreciation of the nature of broadcasting. He seems to measure its effectiveness as, in the first place, an agency source for newspapers and in the second, by its ability to reach a very narrowly defined elite... It must be evident to the FCO that the sort of Persian Service which Parsons advocates would be a nonsense.” <sup>[12]</sup>

Parsons was advocating a Persian Service that would report mainly on business and trade and not become too involved in politics while Dodd argued, “commercially orientated programmes can only live within the structure of an overall Service”. He argued that without the news and current affairs he doubted if anyone would listen to *Bazaar-O-Bourse*, the business news programme of the Service. <sup>[13]</sup>

This spat seems to have followed a visit to London in June 1976 by Princess Ashraf. Ashraf, the twin of the Shah, was the most powerful member of his family and had a ten-minute “private conversation” with then Prime Minister Callaghan. Ashraf brought a message of “continuing concern” from the Shah about “the attitude of the press and the BBC towards Iran”. Callaghan actually agreed in the meeting that the coverage of Iran had been “deplorable” but said there was very little he could do to influence the British press. Ashraf asked whether it was not the case that the BBC was “owned” by the Government and expressed great surprise that it could not be controlled, a position that doubtless resonates with the Iranian understanding in 2009. The PM explained that the relationship with the BBC overseas services was a “complicated” one but the extent of Government influence was “very strictly limited”.<sup>[14]</sup>

After several reviews of the Persian Service by the designated board, H.D. Lancashire compiled the final results in November 1977.<sup>[15]</sup> Here the issues that had been raised over the past two years were tackled so as to spell out what the role of the BBC's language services in general and the Persian Service in particular were in securing long-term British interests around the world. The paper quotes from a lecture by Gerard Mansell, the Managing Director of the BBC External Service, that the answer to questions about the future of BBC external broadcasting must rest not just on issues of "narrowly conceived self interest" but more to the importance Britain attaches to the "free movement of ideas, and the world-wide dissemination of truth". The review panel concluded that the BBC could retain its standing and repute only by retaining its "credibility" with listeners. That credibility "rests on accurate and unbiased news and fair and consistent analysis and comment."<sup>[16]</sup>

Clearly the review panel believed that any short-term interests were of lesser importance than such a long-term view. It argued that Iran was a "country of considerable strategic importance", that the Shah was not going to be its only ruler and that Britain must consider the variety of views to be found in Iran. It accepted that under the circumstances it was inevitable that the truth might irritate the Shah and cause trouble for the ambassador but stipulated that the long-term effects of the BBC should not be compromised.<sup>[17]</sup> The review panel took account of all the points made by ambassador Parsons about "our bilateral relationships" but came to the conclusion that "the longer term power for influence of the BBC is a valuable asset which should not be surrendered so long as funds are available to continue it."<sup>[18]</sup>

This review made a powerful defence of the importance of the BBC around the world in conveying British values and the acknowledgement that its credibility was based on providing a truthful account of events, and became the blueprint for the defence of BBC's independence. It rejected Parson's call for closure or reduction of the Service. However, it did not mean that the FCO did not have the right to express concerns when the British "national interest" was threatened.

On 24 January 1978, ambassador Parsons had an audience with the Shah about the BBC and had to explain the Government's "limitations in influencing the BBC and the damage which would be done if we crossed this line." The Shah remained unimpressed and accused the British Government of having no interest in Iran "except in terms of making money". The Shah complained that ministers used to say nice things to him in private but "it was a long time since anyone had the courage to say the same things in public" and finished asking Parsons to tell London that "BBC had brought us to the limit" and that if things did not get any better "it would be impossible for our relationship to remain undamaged".<sup>[19]</sup> Such was the imagined power of BBC broadcasts that the Shah related them directly to the continued UK relations with Iran.

These strong feelings were fed back to London and the FCO in turn asked Parsons to convey to the Shah that his complaints had been taken up with the BBC. Several meetings took place between the FCO, the BBC and the Iranian ambassador in London, while the official British policy was that it was best for the Iranian ambassador to raise the complaints directly with the BBC.

The then Iranian Ambassador in London, Parviz Radji (1983) catalogues the various meetings between himself and Gerald Mansell, Managing Director of BBC External Services, as well as with Ian Trethowan, the Director General of BBC, and Mark Dodd, Head of BBC's Eastern Service. It is clear from these accounts that the Shah was cabling frequently his anger at BBC Persian Service.[\[20\]](#)

The Iranian press also was monitoring BBCPS output and picking up on its language. On 15 December 1977 Keyhan International published a list of what it ridiculed as BBC-esque reporting and concluded that what the BBC does cannot be considered "accidental" since the department is under the "direct supervision" of the British Foreign Office. It wonders why, when the two governments are friendly, "the BBC is actively propagating violence in our country".[\[21\]](#) By the end of January 1978 Iran filed a set of specific complaints. These included various BBC TV programmes as well as David Dimbleby's interview with President Carter in which he accused Iran of human rights violations, Andrew Whitley's report for the Financial Times, and human rights reports by Amnesty International. However, BBC Persian Service remained the main culprit.

Matters became more serious as the Persian broadcasts of the BBC become more popular in Iran over the following months. Questions were raised as to why the Persian Service that had been relatively unimportant in the 1960s and early 1970s had suddenly become the main source of information on developments inside Iran and amongst the exiled opposition? Persian Service's senior programme assistant, Lutfali Khonji, pointed out in a recent interview that there was no conspiracy in the reporting but simply that so much was happening:

"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."[\[22\]](#)

Other British voices started to raise questions about the role of the BBC. David Ransom, writing in the Daily Telegraph, asserted that the BBC Persian Service has been "infiltrated by anti-Shah elements". But the Managing Director of BBC External Broadcasting, Gerard Mansell, immediately and strongly refuted this, accusing the Daily Telegraph of publishing views that are "wholly without foundation". Referring to several such opinions previously published in the paper he said that they were merely "repeating malicious accusations made over the weeks and months by those who have an interest in the news being manipulated for political ends." He defended the staff in the Persian Service as constituting a team of "high quality" with "impeccable professionalism" who had at no time given grounds for suspecting their integrity despite "the pressures to which they, too, have been exposed"[\[23\]](#)

Mansell wrote a similar letter to Peter Temple Morris MP, who had received complaints about a member of the BBCPS staff, giving details of the background and education of the staff in the Persian Service. Mansell notes that nine programme assistants in the Service have "outstanding academic qualifications" with one holding a "PhD in linguistics from London University".[\[24\]](#) There are similar letters from the

Persian Programme Organizer, John Dunn, and other internal BBC exchanges responding to complaints, evidence of a strong campaign against the BBCPS.[25]

There are also several exchanges between the FCO and the BBC about Persian Service broadcasters. The Iranian Government was accusing them of giving only “the opposition side of the story”, inviting the public to unrest and thus giving “little importance to a balanced account of events”. [26] Lutfali Khonji believes that this may have been the impression that was given but the reality was that a revolutionary movement was growing and everyone, including the staff of the Persian Service, had become far more involved in politics. Political activists without access to media in Iran were contacting the BBC with news. According to Khonji, this was engaging:

“Those working in the BBC had their own set of contacts. Some had close contacts with 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 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.” [27]

Another Persian broadcaster, Baqer Moin, acknowledged recently on Radio Four’s Document programme that he had been pro revolution. However, he added that BBC guidelines did not allow any of the broadcasters to bring their political opinions into their reporting. Moin, who became the head of Persian Service in 1990, said that during the period of revolution there was little any individual broadcaster could do since most news and reports were prepared in the newsroom and was translated and read by broadcasters. [28]

Several reviews of the Persian service suggest that this is an accurate description of the process. Most found only small criticism in the production and delivery of news. One of the letters from the embassy in Tehran to the Middle East Department of FCO gave an example:

“After giving Whitley’s account of recent public meetings... they added, quite gratuitously it seems to us, a Reuters item to the effect that in a recent wrestling tournament the Iranian spectators had shouted ‘Yankee Go Home’ at the American team whereas there had been much support for the Russian team. This had clearly been added by the editorial staff in London and was not attributable to Whitley.” [29]

This shows how sensitive British officials had become to BBC reports and how they would scrutinize the smallest detail, often to do with translation of words. In another letter, Lucas of the Middle East Department at FCO accepted that “Persians are characteristically over-reacting” but wondered whether if it was “to the benefit of the BBC” to be putting out a commentary. He suggested that, under the circumstances,

the BBC could argue that it was an asset in the British relationship with Iran, “but it is clearly a liability when it assumes the role of commentator as distinct from reporter”.

It was not just the Iranians that were critical of the Persian broadcasts. On his regular Thursday evening broadcasts on Capital Radio, Lord George Brown criticized the “BBC Overseas Services” for “broadcasting Ayatollah Khomeini’s instructions to the people.” He said he regarded this as a very “improper” use of “a publicly funded station.” He drew a distinction between what he termed “the coloured work done in the basement cellars in BBC Bush House” where they “interfere in other people’s politics”, in comparison to the “excellent news programmes which go out in English”, putting his finger on the distinction between external and internal services while refusing to acknowledge any framing of the world by and in the latter.<sup>[30]</sup> Gerard Mansell of the BBC responded with equal force: “I am going to be equally forthright and say that this is utter rubbish. Indeed I am surprised that Lord George Brown should have allowed himself to lend his name to denigration of this kind.” Mansell believed that Brown had “his ear bent by people who had interest in doing so” and wondered why he hadn’t “checked his facts” with the BBC, inviting Brown to listen to “all the recordings of our Persian Service output”. He said that, like all other BBC overseas service, the Persian Service existed “to serve the national interests and I firmly believe it does just that.” Gerard Mansell’s strong defence of the performance of the Persian Service, which was published in [Broadcast, the internal BBC magazine](#), concluded: “all this about the BBC Persian Service helping to destabilize Iran on behalf of that elderly exile, the Ayatollah Khomeini, is of course nonsense.”<sup>[31]</sup>

During this period, the BBC correspondent in Tehran, Andrew Whitley, was under constant pressure. He was instructed by British and Iranian officials alike how he should go about his journalism. The Iranian information minister, Dariush Homayoun, told him that his first responsibility as a BBC journalist was “to contribute towards greater Irano-British understanding” and that he should always “be careful to see news against this wider background”, to which Whitley replied that perhaps Iran’s officials should provide more information so reporters didn’t have to always talk to the opposition.<sup>[32]</sup> In a separate letter Whitley illustrates how he always had to explain his reports to British officials too:

“After Buckmaster’s telephone call I discussed the situation with the Acting Head of Eastern Service who arranged for me to call at the FCO in the afternoon to present our case and the relevant documents to him. Another senior official also attended the meeting – I believe named Mike Carver. It was cordial, though it was made quite clear to me how seriously the FCO regard the complaint and the Ambassador’s telegram. Our right to broadcast the dispatch in Persian was accepted and I believe understood. Buckmaster suggested we could have avoided giving offence by omitting reference to...”  
<sup>[33]</sup>

The fact that Whitley had to meet up so many times with the FCO to “explain” and that the FCO officials would recommend that certain phrases could have been “omitted” indicates that direct demands were being made on the details of broadcasting by the FCO. From the correspondence it also appears that some form of verbal agreement was been reached in the meetings between the BBC and the FCO over matters relating to the national interest, although this is kept highly confidential.

In a letter marked “personal and confidential”, written on 19 April 1978, JHG Leahy of the FCO reminds the BBC Managing Director, Gerard Mansell of an agreement:

“You and I agreed the other day that there might be occasions when it would be right for me to send you papers which were intended for your eyes only...I should of course be happy to come and discuss with you... ways for establishing closer supervision of the Persian Service, and if possible, reducing its commentaries on Iranian internal affairs to, say, five minutes at a time?” [34]

While such FCO comment on content and language was comparatively light-tough, there is also evidence that in 1978 it also tried to interfere in the BBC recruitment process of reporters working on Iran. In several exchanges, the FCO expressed dismay at the BBC’s appointment of a Mr. Branigan from the Washington Post and also considered it unacceptable that Liz Thurgood of the Guardian should replace Andrew Whitley while he went on leave. The basic argument made was that the Shah of Iran has strongly objected to reports by both and they are “heartily disliked”. [35]

The Iranian attack on the BBC was fairly relentless. In December 1978, just a couple of months before the revolution, Ambassador Radji wrote to Sir Michael Swann, chairman of the BBC Board of Governors, accusing the Persian Section of “a positively hostile attitude towards Iran during the past two years.” He claimed that the Section pursued “methods of journalistic manipulation” and “doctoring of the news”, adding that the BBC was careful “to cover its tracks in a strictly legal sense by creating an aura of supposed objectivity”, which could have been an interesting critique of BBC practice were it not so petulantly made. To illustrate his point he said that the BBC Home service, World Service and television all reported the ending of oil strikes in the south of Iran but the Persian section refused to do so and instead carried another item that spoke of the continuation of the strike. He also argued that the Persian Section “consistently” used sources that were “hostile to the Iranian regime.” [36]

One of the common assertions amongst pro-Shah Iranians is that the BBC was always ahead of the news in Iran, especially that the BBC would announce upcoming demonstrations before they were announced in Iran. This comes up in the letter of complaint from Ambassador Radji who accuses the Section of violating “journalistic ethics”:

“No responsible radio or newspaper carries news of wild-cat strikes in advance. But the Section does so as a matter of policy. For a whole week it tells its listeners that a strike will be observed on a specific day.” [37]

He goes on to say that the Section ignores “the fact that the Khomeini-led part of the opposition” is for the overthrow of the regime and thus “illegal”. Radji compared the coverage to the BBC regularly interviewing the IRA or the British Anarchist Party, said that he had never seen the British media publicizing in advance demonstrations by the IRA and thus accused the BBC of “double standards”. [38] Radji concluded that the BBC followed a policy of “deliberate hostility towards Iran” with the effect of “subversion of Iran’s legally constituted Government and systematic encouragement of violence.” [39] **That the revolutionary system brought in to Iran by these events**

should thirty years later, after a summer of discontent, accuse the BBC of the very same thing is an irony not lost on those who worked in the BBC then and now

The same idea was echoed by the Iranian newspaper Keyhan International, accused the BBC of “actively propagating violence in our country”.<sup>[40]</sup> Although Parsons described this as a “virulent” attack on the BBC, he considered the main objection by the Shah was to “the extensive and over sympathetic coverage given to the dissidents and students” and a refusal to report “improvements” in human rights in the year prior to the revolution. He also felt he could and should intervene directly by speaking to the BBC reporter in Tehran, Andrew Whitley, and to the BBC Eastern Service controller, Stride:

“I told them that although I considered it none of my business what they choose to report, they should know just how unpopular the BBC was now with the Shah. I told them that if the clock were turned back four years to when Bierman was expelled, Whitley would have been out of the country by now. Whitley accepted that he had filed a few dispatches that had been critical of the Government’s role in the disturbances but said he had also recently filed a number of favourable stories, e.g. about a state visit to Oman.”<sup>[41]</sup>

The ambassador’s veiled threats echoed those of Iranian officials. In a letter to the FCO, Parsons enclosed an “aide memoir” from the Foreign Ministry in Iran which ran: “In spite of repeated warnings” to the British Government in recent months covering “the malicious policy of the BBC Farsi programme ... no changes have unfortunately been made in the policy.” Considering that the corporation is not a private organization and that the British Government provides its budget, “the excuse that the BBC is independent of the Government” is “unacceptable”. It argues that the BBC seems to be a “propaganda instrument for those groups whose aim is to encourage people to revolt against the legally established regime of Iran” and this is “against the mutual interests of the two nations”. Two main cases were identified. One is a report by Baqer Moin in the main flagship program *Jame Jahan Nama* and the other is an interview with Ayatollah Khomeini that was broadcast in the same program. The report found objectionable was translated by the embassy in Teheran and attached:

“Religious and political leaders of Iran have requested that tomorrow, Sunday, be announced as a protest and mourning day. A BBC reporter in Tehran says in his report: the speaker of one of the important religious leaders in Mashad said that people demonstrated inside the Shrine of Imam Reza which is the holiest religious place for the Shiite followers of the world. He said soldiers attacked and shot them with automatic rifles. Two religious leaders of Mashad, who are amongst the most prominent sources of the Shiite sect, Ayatollah Shirazi and Ayatollah Ghomi issued communiqués in which they protested against the shooting... and urged a one day national mourning on Sunday. Today Ayatollah Khomeini requested that a one-day strike be made as a gesture instead. Meanwhile several other religious leaders in Tehran asked for a one-day mourning which practically means a strike. Ayatollah Khomeini’s communiqué coincided with the National Front communiqué. The National Front in

its communiqué, which is very proactive, says the Government has shown its anti-Islamic face.” [\[42\]](#)

This report is somewhat different to the usual style of BBC reporting. The name of the BBC reporter in Tehran is not given, so it is difficult to know whether this was Andrew Whitley’s piece translated by the Service or written by Baqer Moin. It also does not say to whom the comments from the ayatollahs were addressed, nor whether by interview or in a statement? It says “several religious leaders” had said the same thing, without naming or quoting them. This report – if it is translated accurately— does appear more editorialized than usual BBC reports and many BBC editors may not feel have been happy about broadcasting in that tone.

The issue continued to buzz and some MPs became quite agitated about the role of BBCPOS. In a controversial interview with BBC’s World at One, Lord George Brown again distinguished the BBC World Service in English from the language Services and targeted the émigré broadcasters as the source of the problem, rather than those on the ground in Tehran:

“You have the separate band – separate broadcasts – in the languages of the people in the country which deal with the political issues... which is staffed by -- necessarily so – émigrés, refugees from those countries who are hostile to the regime of the country; that is why they are émigrés in the first place. They are operating in a way that expresses their views, their desires, which may or may not fit with the policy of the Government of this country. And because the BBC is funded by the Government – and everyone overseas knows this – it is assumed that this is British Government policy.”

In the Daily Telegraph in December 1978 Julian **Amery** MP picked up the same theme, arguing that “the young radicals have achieved an effective penetration of the Iranian Service of the BBC”. Brown made an even stronger accusation, saying that the “Farsi service run by émigré Iranians” was not only “putting out anti-shah propaganda”, but it was putting out “heavily pro-Khomeini propaganda”, neither of which - according to him - was the Government policy. Brown claimed that “one of his (Khomeini) associates on the staff of BBC Overseas Service put out a call to the people of Tehran to riot, to go to the streets” and “that was going beyond reporting news”. He called for a “parliamentary inquiry” to determine “that this very thin line between propaganda and news, between propaganda and truth, was not overstepped.”[\[43\]](#)

Mansell, Managing Director of BBC External Broadcasting was furious and adamantly refuted the charge, saying that the external services of the BBC “do not transmit propaganda, either in Persian or any other language”, nor were they compliant in serving the cause of Shah’s exiled religious opponents or anyone else:

“Over the period of May to October [1978] there were more than 450 items on developments in Iran in our Persian Service news output. Only six of those quoted the Ayatollah. Extracts from interviews given by the Ayatollah to the British TV and Radio were broadcast only once – and then for sound journalistic reasons. They were hardly calculated to foment civil strife but any Iranian can buy

cassettes recordings of the ayatollah's outpourings in the Bazaar. These are nothing to do with the BBC." [44]

Thirty years on, Baqer Moin interviewed for the Radio 4 "Document" programme said that like many other Iranians he was not pro-Shah but more in favour of the rule of law, human rights and against censorship. "I wasn't in favour of the shah but I never campaigned in any sense," says Baqer Moin. "The BBC was really very careful not to have anybody active in politics to be participating in the programmes of the Persian Service." However, when pressed, he said he was "pro-revolution like many others in the country."

There were also examples given by BBC staff that suggested an opposite dynamic to that described by Brown. The following example, relating to a highly controversial interview with Ayatollah Khomeini that coincided with the second complaint made by the Iranian Government, comes from Lutfali Khonji as a personal story. Khonji said that when, with great difficulty, he managed to get an appointment to interview the Ayatollah he was blocked by the BBC's head of Eastern Service, Mark Dodd. Khonji says

"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 blow the events out of proportion." [45]

Khonji uses this as an example to reject the common belief that the BBC was supporting the Islamic revolution in Iran. However, FCO documents show that Mark Dodd's assertion was made under pressure from the Iranian Embassy in London and Khonji recalls that after about three weeks, Mark Dodd did allow the interview with Khomeini. This famous single interview with Ayatollah Khomeini came under strong scrutiny later for failing to meet journalistic standards.

The Foreign Office was seriously alarmed when Mark Dodd informed them about the plan to interview Khomeini. At the foreign policy meeting, serious concern was expressed. The minutes of the meeting record that "this was a development of such potential seriousness" that the FCO was "justified in taking the matter up with the BBC at a high level." Leahy of the Middle East Department of the FCO said "I hope the BBC is not contemplating interviewing Khomeini...we have already gone as far as we should." The main issue was about how to stop the BBC from broadcasting an interview with Khomeini. The directive from the Foreign Secretary, David Owen, was that the BBC should not be approached directly, Owen having repeatedly emphasized the importance of BBC's independence in his correspondence. This was, however, always coupled with a word of caution that left room for making protests to the BBC. For example in his letter to Sir Michael of the BBC's Board of Governors on 14 December 1978 following the complaints, Owen says:

"I am a strong believer in the independence of the BBC and the value of the BBC's external broadcasts. I have therefore been scrupulous

about defending your independence at all stages. I believe it would be gravely damaging to the long-term future of Britain's standing in the world if there were to be an attempt of Government interference. I have, however, to assure myself that you and your board are fully aware of the criticisms from foreign governments and I feel it is my responsibility to satisfy myself that you have given the representations of foreign governments full consideration.”[46]

Owen admits that the fact that the FCO finances the external services presents a problem but reiterates that he will tell the Iranian Foreign Minister in their meeting about BBC's “editorial independence”. [47] Leahy reveals in his letter that there has been an agreement of some sort with the BBC, although he does not spell it out:

“In terms of the agreement we with have with them [BBC] they are obliged to ‘obtain and accept’ such information regarding conditions in, and the policies of HM Government...as will enable the Corporation to plan and prepare its programmes in the external services in the national interest.” [48]

Leahy doubted that the BBC would forego the interview with Khomeini and indeed, if they did, there was a risk that this itself would become known and then the FCO would be seen to be putting pressure on the BBC. A few days later, news of the Persian Service interview was confirmed, so despite their attempts the FCO had not managed to stop the broadcast. Weir in the FCO informed the Foreign Minister, David Owen, that he had tried too late and although he had delayed it, he had not managed to stop the interview. But there were no calls to arms expressed in the interview:

“I telephoned Mark Dodd who made enquiries and came back to say the BBC could find no such phrase in any of the broadcasts quoting Khomeini. He added that the Persian Service is not carrying any statements by Khomeini...The Khomeini interview was broadcast later.”[49]

Weir said the BBC was beginning to get the message about the serious potential repercussions of their broadcasts.” but added that “we will maintain our official policy of not putting pressure on the BBC”. [50]

What had happened was that the Persian Service had contacted a close aid to Khomeini, Abolhasan Banisadr, who later became president of Iran. They asked him to help set up an interview with Khomeini. The Ayatollah had rejected the idea, according to Banisadr, saying: “The BBC belongs to the British and it is not in my best interest to give them an interview”. Banisadr said “I convinced him when I said all the other media you give interviews to are also foreign so what is the difference!” Khomeini then accepted.[51] He had asked for questions to be faxed to him in Paris, which was done, although David **Perman** of the World Service who accompanied Ferydoon Jahed to conduct the interview did not know about this. **Perman** says that at the time this was not so important:

“We know it is an important interview now with hindsight. At the time most of us did not even know what an Ayatollah was, we could not even imagine

he would one day be the leader of Iran. We wanted democracy for Iran. We went to this village outside Paris, went to his room and sat down cross-legged. He would have no eye contact with us. Areas of questioning were agreed with the Ayatollah. When I asked a question about the minorities, he answered it but then turned back to his aides who told us if there was any other unwritten question he would stop the interview immediately. I did not know there were written questions.”[\[52\]](#)

So was there any truth in the accusation that the interview appeared like propaganda or that the BBC oversaw the “coronation of the Ayatollah”? In the March 2009 radio documentary on this subject, Permian said the result was that “the Ayatollah did use it as a platform for his views” but that “was surprising and that it was not our intention to give him such a platform. ...to that extent it was not a good interview, I wasn’t able to press him with supplementary questions.” On the other hand he thinks it was still “a good interview because it did show what we were facing.”[\[53\]](#) Also looking back, Mark Dodd, the then head of the Eastern Service who was responsible for the content, thinks this was an “unsatisfactory” basis for conducting an interview but sees much journalistic value in getting the interview from a man who “himself was the story.”

“What you could get out of him was going to illuminate the character of the man. You could make a case for the interview but I think it was flawed. Our coverage was not as full as we would have wished, there were mistakes, there were gaps, I am not for a moment saying this was an impeccable Service. There were occasions when we made mistakes, I am still sorry that we made those mistakes but they were infinitely less than our critics suggested.” [\[54\]](#)

However, the military authorities in Iran continued to “regard the BBC Persian Service as contributing to “present security problems”, Parsons reported from Tehran.[\[55\]](#) The FCO itself began monitoring the Persian Service in London in December 1978 just two months before the Revolution. They wrote back to the embassy in Tehran saying that in none of the broadcasts they heard indicated any “false inflections”, there were no “obvious” examples of “slanting or distortion” and the overall content and presentation of material also seemed “quite well balanced”. They reported that there was, however, “some evidence of looseness of editorial supervision”, and “words were often translated in three or four different ways” but none of the words could be said to have been “stronger” in tone than the others.[\[56\]](#)

In a letter analyzing the overall results of monitoring the Persian broadcasts, Rundle of the Research Department admitted that “perhaps inevitably”, with the opposition making the running in the last few weeks, “there has been more time spent on reporting opposition than Government activities” and that much of the reporting would “not have been to the liking of the Iranian authorities”.[\[57\]](#)

Another report highlighted as being pro-opposition was a report in the 11 December 1978 News:

“Large crowds of people have again gathered in Tehran and other cities in Iran to take part in religious ceremonies and also in demonstrations against the Shah. It is estimated that the size of the crowd, going to Shahyad Square was even greater than the one million who were there yesterday. Our reporter

says that the demonstrators were more militant than yesterday and the slogans were not only religious but made explicit attacks on the Shah himself and the Crown Prince, and many of them called for his death. The BBC correspondent in Tehran said that for kilometres nothing could be seen but banners and flags... the religious leaders read aloud a declaration in support of their leader, Ayatollah Khomeini who is living in Paris...”[58]

Was this truly a departure from BBC Persian Service’s style of reporting in the previous years or was it a reflection of the breath and depth of events happening in Iran? The broader question of impartiality of reporters at major historical junctures could be debated in relation to reporting during the weeks and months leading to the Iranian revolution. It is often the journalists themselves who carry the general tone of the news. At the time the recruitment criteria were different in the BBC World Service English and in the language services. BBC English reporters were recruited after several tests on their reporting skills. Those in language services were recruited mainly on their translation skills. They were not even recruited as producers at that stage and were referred to as program assistants and translators. Consequently programme assistants did not have any control over the content and could not, or should not, have editorialized. However, under the circumstances, the speed of incoming news and developments must have been confusing. Editorial scrutiny may have been challenging. Individual staff preferences could have contributed to the tone and selection of news items.

Asked in a recent interview about the opinion of staff at the time, Khonji says it was a true reflection of Iranian society at home and abroad. He claims about 80% of the staff supported the revolution and only 20% were against it. He says that the reason for the increased popularity of BBC could have been the better communication with the opposition as well as the fact that Radio Iran was on strike. BBC Persian Service staff also believe that the BBC itself had become far more open to newer methods of production. Khonji and other members of staff interviewed, including Baqer Moin, Shahrar Tabari and Solmaz Dabiri, all reject the assertion strongly that the British Government was pro the revolution or used the BBC for furthering that aim. They say there was never any push or force on any member of the staff.

However, Iranian supporters of the Shah continued to view the BBC’s role most sceptically. In a revealing account of the Shah’s perception of events, 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 said the composition of journalists in search of “ever more sensational news led to the most regrettable excesses.”[59] The Shah goes on to blame the BBC:

“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.” [60]

In his book, the then US Ambassador, William Sullivan, recalls how the Shah regularly complained 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:

“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.” [\[61\]](#)

Whatever the Shah and his supporters may have assumed, there was no intention on the part of the British Government to destabilize the Shah. Foreign Office documents show clearly that the British Government saw in the Shah the most suitable leader for guarding British interests. It is only in September 1978 –five months before the revolution in Iran – that the British Government recognised the first signs of the possible downfall of the Shah. The Foreign Office and Downing Street were both “shocked” at the prospect. The FCO’s Middle East department began to assess possible scenarios and still came to the conclusion that “in the present climate of uncertainty prevailing in the region from Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa, the Shah is a vital bastion against Soviet encroachment with enormous threats which that presents to Western oil supplies and to our trade.” Lucas of the Middle East Department wrote to the Prime Minister that:

“The shah represents the best prospect for orderly progress in Iran itself. He is a hyper sensitive man with long memory (which broods upon the British role in deposing his father). Any wavering in the support of his friends and allies [UK and US] will accordingly have adverse effects on him.”

The Foreign Office also suggested that if any regime from amongst the opposition groups active in Iran were to succeed the Shah, “ranging from communist dominated revolutionary regime to reactionary Muslim system”, Iran would become “hostile to Western interests, as well as probably failing to assert control over the country.”[\[62\]](#) Clearly, part of that assessment was correct, but only part.

So, the perceived alternative political scenarios were not in any way welcomed by the British Government. Nor indeed were they liked by the US. The Secretary of **State, Warren Christopher**, is quoted in FCO meetings as saying the US was looking to give “psychological and other support” to the Shah whom they regarded as “the only vehicle of stability in the country.”[\[63\]](#) Eventually a letter of support was written to the Shah from the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, saying that it was sad that “all this should happen at a time when your Imperial Majesty’s leadership has been moving steadily in the direction of becoming a modern industrial society.” The Shah was encouraged in this letter to hold elections and continue to move forward with his “program for progress”.[\[64\]](#)

Clearly, the Shah and his supporters still regarded the BBC as a source of revolutionary fervor. Ambassador Radji’s accounts of meetings in London reveal that

anger with the BBC was persistent and threatened to get out of hand. According to his account, various members of the Iranian Government who wanted to express complaints to the BBC were told that the BBC acts independently and when in London, they were frequently taken around the BBC to see how the BBC newsroom operates and how the Persian broadcasters are translating the news. The go-betweens were trying to persuade Iranian officials that there could be no government pressure on the BBC:

“The [Foreign Ministers] session breaks up and David Owen walks up to me followed by Khalatbari [Iranian FM], 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 [David Owen] 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.” [\[65\]](#)

Radji describes how other Iranians of influence were getting together to put pressure on the BBC’s Persian Service. FCO documents also reveal the protestation by several influential Iranians, such as Seyed Hussein Nasr, **head of Queen Farah’s office**, and the Iranian millionaire, David Allainace. For example, Radji wrote 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.” [\[66\]](#)

In a letter to the BBC Board of Governors, another supporter of the Shah, Farmanfarmaian, argued that the Persian Service “does not adhere to the British standards of fair play” and tabled a five page detailed breakdown of his criticism of BBC broadcasts. [\[67\]](#) Professor SH Nasr, “the distinguished Muslim scholar, close to the Shahbanou” made a direct complaint to the FCO that even those Iranians who were not anti-BBC “resented its interference in Iran’s affairs.” [\[68\]](#) He claimed that there was a general belief that “the Persian Service” was acting in furtherance of a joint British/Soviet plan to undermine the American position” and that the gesture from David Owen was only “part of the act”. He claimed, “The British were canny (it was said) enough to know that the best way of discrediting the Shah was to support him.” [\[69\]](#) On December 1, 1978 Ambassador Radji wrote to the Foreign Secretary to inform him that the BBC representative had been summoned to the Ministry to explain his misrepresentation of facts in reporting the money transfers and that his expulsion seemed probable.” [\[70\]](#) Andrew Whitley was subsequently expelled from Iran.

Thirty years on Whitley says that he was not surprised at the anger of the Shah and his supporters. The BBC Persian broadcasts had “a huge impact, everyone heard the program, everyone I spoke to anywhere in Tehran and other major cities, listened to the BBC”. He admits that he was pro-revolution: “They had justice on their side... I personally believed that change was overdue in Iran...However, I was not in anyway advocating either for a leftist revolution or for the overthrow of the Shah.” When asked whether “the BBC did fan the flames of the revolution?” Whitley says he “would not use those words but the BBC did play a role...If it was not for the BBC’s

broadcasts into the country and its huge listenership I think that the revolution would not have proceeded as quickly as it did.”[\[71\]](#) Whitley felt that:

“The BBC ought to be careful about overstepping the line between reporting and being seen as part and parcel of the opposition movement. I don’t believe the BBC - as a foreign broadcasting organization - ought to be in a position of attempting to change domestic events but I wouldn’t put intent on our side.”  
[\[72\]](#)

## Conclusions

BBC Persian Service had probably never been as popular as it was during the years leading to the Iranian revolution of 1979 that led to the formation of the Islamic Republic. The reality is that BBC Persian broadcasts took the lead in reporting the Iranian revolution of 1979 and both the BBC management and the FCO were taken by surprise. They were caught in the middle. An important element of British foreign policy was being played out: the BBC was communicating closely with Iranians, partly through the Persians employed at Bush House.

At the same time, BBC has probably never been seen to be as partial to news as it was during those years. A major revolution was in the making and this was not being reported anywhere more closely than on the BBC Persian Service. Whitley is probably right in stressing there was no intention on the part of the BBC or the FCO to have such an impact. A revolution was in full swing in Iran, and the British Foreign Office and the Ambassador in Tehran were not fully aware of it. By contrast, the BBC Persian broadcasts were representing the emerging voice of the popular opposition. There was almost complete media censorship in Iran in the months of leading to the revolution. By November 1978, Iran had come “within an ace of a total collapse of law and order” and the military government had ordered that as a temporary measure the local media had to be brought under strict control in order “to give the country a chance to calm down.” As a result “there is virtually no local press and the TV and radio is heavily censored.”[\[73\]](#) As a result the only way in which the opposition, including Khomeini, the National Front and the religious leadership in Iran, could get their message across to their own people was through the BBC Persian Service.[\[74\]](#)

In terms of professional journalism, this was a unique opportunity for the BBC World Service as a whole and the Persian Service in particular. Their techniques of reporting, interviewing, production, and broadcast were under close scrutiny and this could have only helped in building better journalism. Yet Whitley is probably right in stressing that the BBC must be careful not to overstep “the line between reporting and being seen as part and parcel of the opposition movement.”

Amongst the factors that contributed to the overwhelming success in broadcasting was the close contact of some of the staff with opposition leaders. This gave the BBC an edge over other media outlets. Moreover, BBC had managed for the first time to secure permission for one of its correspondents in Tehran. Thus audiences hugely increased due to these improved technical elements as well as the importance of the

events that were unfolding. This in turn enabled a language service hitherto petrified in its mould to strengthen its performance by better radio production techniques and close up reporting from inside Iran. It made it possible for the Persian Service to justify the necessity of interviewing prominent figures involved in the revolution. Perhaps in some small measure editorial checks lapsed on occasion and some of the reports indicate a departure from BBC's objective balanced style, seeming to be mainly based on opposition accounts of events. However, this was not helped by the fact that the government in Iran was not providing accurate information.

Events were unfolding so rapidly that there seems to have been debate and disagreement inside the FCO too on how to deal with the BBC. The Ambassador in Tehran, Sir Anthony Parsons, was most concerned about the survival of the Shah. One group inside the Foreign Office believes that the Shah did not have foresight to think and plan long term. Another group supported him and felt that the FCO should limit the Persian broadcasts to those relating to trade. However, others saw a more long-term function for language services and were not convinced at all about closure of the service. So there was no consensus inside the FCO on how to deal with the BBC. The Foreign Secretary, David Owen, was clear on his instructions to the FCO not to interfere with the BBC but to approach them in a more cordial way. This was due mainly to the ability of the BBC to fight back. The exchanges inside the FCO also show reluctance to interfere in case the news of this "got out".

The elements that make up the complicated web of claims and counterclaims about the partiality of the broadcasts pale in relative significance. The original documents of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office reveal that there was no conspiracy on the part of the British Government to create a revolution in Iran, far from it. Documents also clearly show that the BBC World Service had by this time become far more confident about keeping its independence intact. Despite repeated threats on the BBC Persian Service not just from the Shah, the Iranian Ambassador in London and powerful industrialist supporters of the Shah in the UK, and despite the repeated argument about the so called "British interests in the region", the BBC Eastern Service management seemed in no doubt that neither government – not the Iranian and not the British - should interfere in its functioning. BBC World Service was focused on reporting a historical event rather than the diplomatic considerations raised by some. This indicates a powerful evolution in the relationship between the FCO and the BBC in favour of the independence of the latter, and a far cry from the days of broadcasting in 1941 when the FCO would be writing "the line" for BBC or indeed the episode in 1951-53 over the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis.

Despite the fact that again in 1978 British interests - the survival of a trusted British ally in the region - were seriously threatened, the BBC management, especially Mark Dodd and Gerard Mansell, were confident that BBC's independence could not be undermined. The British Government and the British ambassador in Tehran seem to remain firmly behind the Shah of Iran right up to the final days. Documents up to two months prior to the Revolution (those so far available in the National Archives) do not indicate any interest on the part of the British Government for a change of leadership in Iran. Even the contingency planning of the British Government remained certain that there was no alternative group or person that would serve British interests better than the Shah. However, the FCO documents relating to the year 1979 – to be

released in early 2010– may shed new light on British policy in the last two months prior to the Iranian revolution.

There are many parallels in this account with the uprising of 2009 and the role of the newly-established BBC Persian television: the ‘revolutionary’ regime makes claims of interference, of the British wanting to ‘soft topple’ the Islamic Republic and of the use of tools of ‘public diplomacy’ such as the British Council and the BBC, to that end. Iranian misunderstanding about the BBC, willful or not, continues as does the delicate dance between the FCO and the BBC about supporting British interests or being an international broadcaster. History sheds light on the past, often only to reveal the continuities with the present.

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[1] A previous article has examined these earlier moments in the history of BBC relations with Iran; see Sreberny and Torfeh in *Historical Journal*

[2] FCO8/3212, 15 December 1978, Telegram from Sir Anthony Parsons.

[3] FCO8/2762, 1 August 1976, Telegram from Sir Anthony Parsons to Nicholas Barrington at FCO.

[4] BBC WAC, E58/25/1, 11 April 1975 enclosure with letter from M.S. Buckmaster of FCO Guidance and Information Department to Mark Dodd at BBC.

[5] FCO8/2762, 1 August 1976, Telegram from Sir Anthony Parsons to Nicholas Barrington at FCO.

[6] *Ibid.*, 16 July 1976.

[7] BBC WAC, E40/711/1, 8 July 1976, Confidential Minutes of BBC Board of Governors meeting.

[8]

[9] BBC WAC, E40/710/1, 15 July 1976

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] FCO8, 3215: Text of the License and Agreement between the BBC and FCO.

[12] BBC WAC: E58/25/1, Date not clear as checked with WAC staff but expected to be mid 1976.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] FCO8/2767: 9 June 1976, from 10 Downing Street to Richard Dales at the FCO.

[15] BBC WAC: E40/710/1, 9 November 1977, Review of the Persian Service.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] FCO 8/3212: 25 January 1978 from Anthony Parsons to FCO.

[20] Parviz Radji, *In the Service of the Peacock Throne*, Hamish Hamilton Publishers 1983, p111)

[21] BBC WAC: 15 December 1977, *Keyhan International* Article.

[22] Interview with M. Torfeh

[23] BBC WAC, E40/840/1, 3 January 1978, Letter from Mansell to W. Deedes, editor of the *Daily Telegraph*.

[24] BBC WAC, E40/840/1, 4 December 1978, Letter from Mansell to Peter Temple Morris MP

[25] See BBC WAC, E40/840/1 Persian Complaints File.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Interview with M. Torfeh

[28] Document, BBC Radio 4, 24 March 2009

[29] FCO 8/3212, 11 January 1978: from Miers (Tehran) to Lucas (MED).

[30] *Broadcast Magazine*, 11 June 1979, cited at BBC WAC, E58/27/1: Persian Complaints.

[31] *Ibid.*, 11 December 1979.

[32] FCO 8/3212, 15 December 1977: telegram from Ambassador Parsons in Tehran.

[33] BBC WAC, e58/25/1, 4 June 1976, From Andrew Whitley to Head of Eastern Service, BBC World Service.

- [34] FCO 8/3213: 19 April 1978, Letter from Leahy at FCO to Mansell at the BBC.
- [35] See FCO 8/3213, exchanges between the FCO and BBC from March to April 1978 on Iran and the BBC.
- [36] BBC WAC, Persian Complaints, E40/840/1, 21 December 1978
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] BBC WAC, Persian Complaints, E40/840/1
- [40] Anthony Parsons telegram from Tehran to FCO, 15 December 1978, FCO8/3212.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] FCO 8/3215, 27 November 1978, from Tehran to Immediate FCO, Iran's Image in the Media, BBC, January to December 1978.
- [43] BBC WAC, E58/27/1: 26 October 1979, Persian Complaints, Extracts from World At One.
- [44] Ibid, E40/840/1, 17 November 1978.
- [45] Ibid.
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] Ibid.
- [48] FCO 8/3214: 1 November 1978, from J.H.G. Leahy on BBC Iran.
- [49] FCO 8/3214, 9 November 1978: from Weir to FM.
- [50] Ibid.
- [51] BBC Persian Service Archives, program produced by Shahryar Radpoor for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Service.
- [52] Radio 4 "Document", 24 March 2009.
- [53] Ibid.
- [54] Ibid.
- [55] FCO 8/3215, 27 November 1978: Iran's Image in the Media, BBC, Sir Anthony Parsons to FCO.
- [56] FCO 8/3215, 20 December 1978, Iran's Image in the Media, BBC, January to December 1978.
- [57] Ibid. From CJS Rundle, Research Department, FCO to GA Pirie, Tehran.
- [58] Ibid.
- [59] "The Shah's Story" published in 1980 by Michael Joseph Ltd, p161.
- [60] (Ibid p163)
- [61] William H. Sullivan, Mission to Iran, WW Norton & Co, USA, 1981, pp156-7.
- [62] FCO 8/ 3185, 13 September 1978, I.T.M. Lucas Middle Eastern Department – speaking notes for Cabinet 14 September.
- [63] FCO8/ 3184, 8 September 1978, Jay to FCO and Whitehall.
- [64] FCO8/3185, 14 September 1978, letter from Downing Street to His Imperial majesty Mohamed Reza Pahlavi Shahshah Aryamehr.
- [65] (Ibid, p167)
- [66] (Ibid, p252)
- [67] FCO 8/3215: 13 December 1978, Iran's Image in the Media, BBC.
- [68] Ibid, 8 December 1978, Letter from ITM Lucas in FCO to Weir in Tehran.
- [69] Ibid.
- [70] (Ibid, p271)
- [71] Radio 4 "Document" 24 March 2009.
- [72] Ibid.
- [73] FCO 8/3215, 27 November 1978: Iran's Image in the Media, BBC, telegram No. 869 from embassy in Tehran to FCO.
- [74] Ibid.