

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

The BBC Persian Service 1941-79

Abstract

The Persian Service radio, originally launched during the final years of the Second World War, has played a major role in relations between the UK and the Persian-speaking world at crucial political conjunctures.

During the last 66 years of broadcasting to Iran – as funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – the Persian broadcasts were particularly relevant against **A:** Nazi influence in Iran, **B:** in the downfall of the powerful Shah of Iran in 1941, **C:** during the oil crisis of the late 40’s and early 50’s and **D:** the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The BBC Persian Service radio has since then remained one of the most important sources of news and information for Iranians, especially at times of crisis or international tension.

BUT, this trust in BBC’s news and information remains in the shadow of skepticism about the role of the British Government - - as the provider of BBC Persian Service’s funds -- in the actual broadcasts. BBC’s history web page describes the editorial independence of the BBC Empire Services as follows:¹

“In the run up to World War II, the Foreign Office began funding BBC language services to counter the growing international propaganda of the Axis powers. From its start, the Service’s editorial independence from the British government was safeguarded, **as it was seen as the**

¹ www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070123_html_1930s.shtml

cornerstone of the service’s credibility and therefore of its impact.”

This paper attempts to look at whether and how far the British Government has tried to use the broadcasts as a tool for political propaganda and influence.

It will in turn ask whether the Persian Service has -- as part of the BBC’s editorial whole – managed to keep its independence intact in reporting events in a balanced and objective way.

This is part of a larger study of the relations between the FCO and the Persian Service. And, since tackling the entire history is outside the boundaries of this conference, two critical periods are chosen whereby the relations became more intense:

- 1. The removal of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941;**
- 2. The UK-Iran oil negotiations during 1948-53;**
- 3. And we will also briefly work our way up to the years that led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.**

Sources of Research

The research is conducted through three primary sources:

1. Interviews with those working with the Persian Service,
2. The archives of the Persian Service broadcasts,
3. Documents of the Public Records Office,
4. The paper has also examined several secondary sources such as books by those directly involved either at the British or Persian Governments or in the BBC.

1. The Persian Service & Reza Shah

The BBC’s Persian Service was one of those specially created language services when the British Government suspected the Iranian king, Reza Shah Pahlavi, of having sympathies for Nazi Germany. Reza Shah had in 1923 in fact come to power with the support of the British Government but declaring Iran neutral,

he declined cooperation in the wartime. This concerned the British Government that he may in fact be taking a pro-Hitler position and could potentially block the Allied efforts in the East.

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

“The success of German Propaganda in Iran and the failure of the British propaganda to make any headway against it have been indicated frequently by the Press Attaché in her reports.”²

On 29 December 1939, Sir Reader Bullard suggested the BBC might have programs in Persian. The Foreign Office responds on 8 February 1940 with a positive note from Lacey Baggallay of the Eastern Department:

“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.”³

The very first head of the Persian broadcasts, Mr. Gladdening, was selected by Mr. Stevenson, BBC’s Head of the Eastern Service as registered in the memo from the Foreign Office to Sir Reader Bullard in Teheran.⁴

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

² (7 February 1741/FO371/E382/211/34)

³ (FO71/E2/2/34/24570)

⁴ (FO371/E2426/24570)

“BBC are anxious to seek our guidance on two points:

1) Whether the Minister needs to be present at the [Persian broadcast’s] inauguration to deliver a message?

2) **The BBC would like to be given a line** as to what attitude they should adopt in their Persian broadcasts, e.g. what subjects to avoid and what aspects of Iranian life to emphasize.”⁵

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

“It should be emphasized that the following suggestions for the guidance of the BBC in the preparation of material for the news broadcasts in Persian language are intended for the use of regular British officials and **they should not be shown or communicated to any Persian speaking official.**”⁶

At this stage the line is that Reza Shah should be treated in these broadcasts with due sensitivity and diplomacy. The memo reads:

“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 HM 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.”⁷

⁵ (Ibid)

⁶ (Ibid)

⁷ (Ibid)

This line did not last very long. Over 1940-41, the British foreign Office documents reveal that Britain becomes increasingly impatient with Reza Shah over his lack of cooperation over the deportation of some 3000 Germans believed to be resident in Iran.

Reza Shah refused to cooperate on grounds that the Germans were mainly engineers employed in his modernization program. He refused to deport them. However British Intelligence had documents revealing that famous German spies, such as Franz Mayer, were working in Iran.

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

"To forestall the Germans 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."⁸

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

"Tribute could be paid to the Shah as a soldier in early days but be hinted that greediness and tyranny have made him a different man...forcible acquisition of land, forced labor, general poverty and corruption, acute shortage of water, Shah's own wealth and ownership of factories... his monopoly of all prices... his involvement with opium trade... his bad treatment of soldiers... weakness of the political structure...Constitution only in name, a powerless parliament, dictated elections... could be highlighted. Also it could be stressed that England has a democratic

⁸ (FO371/28914/34/211)

Government whereas the Shah, like Hitler, thinks the people are like sheep and are only fit to carry orders blindly.”⁹

Later, after the Anglo Soviet invasion of Iran, the British Foreign Office documents show that the British find it impossible to work with Reza Shah. BBC Persian Service was then tasked with broadcasting items that revealed Reza Shah’s autocratic style of leadership and encouraged instead a republican system of Government:

“His Majesty’s Government now agreed that the BBC might begin to give various broadcasts in Persian which had been prepared beforehand, starting with talks on Constitutional Government an increasing in strength and color until all Reza Shah’s mismanagement, greed and cruelty were displayed to the public gaze.”¹⁰

However, what could be regarded as pressure by the Government on the BBC has always been a cause for concern especially at times of war as reflected in BBC’s own account:

“From the start, there was tension with the government as to how much freedom should be allowed in wartime to the BBC radio news operations and it took time to establish an effective method of working between the BBC and the new Ministry of Information. BBC staff were seconded to the Ministry - and so-called "vigilants" from the Ministry were on permanent duty in the newsroom, often alongside representatives of the services.”¹¹

⁹ (FO371/211/34/4902)

¹⁰ (Cited in E.Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, Princeton, 1982, page 165)

¹¹ (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/aboutbbcnews/spl/hi/history/html/default.stm>)

Abbas Dehghan, a veteran BBC Persian broadcaster told the Persian Service in an interview for the 65th anniversary of the Service that:

“We read exactly what we were given to read. We were not allowed to make any changes. There were a couple of English people monitoring the broadcast. They spoke Persian and listened to our broadcasts carefully.”¹²

By the year 1944, the British Government found the BBC Persian broadcasts very effective. In a memo Sir Reader Bullard wrote to the Foreign Office:

“These broadcasts carry more weight than statements made in our local broadcasts in Persian and are listened to by a wider audiences. 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.”¹³

The British Foreign Office decided on 10 February 1944 to raise the level of British legation in Teheran to embassy and plan a wider cultural operation through the British Council. In April 1943, Sir Reader Bullard writes in his memo to the FCO:

“Cultural propaganda is a field in which we have much leeway to make up in Persia. 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.”¹⁴

¹² Ibid

¹³ (Sir Reader Bullard writes to Foreign Office, 9 June 1944, FO371-40194/E3248.)

¹⁴ (FO371/E2081/38/34)

2. The Persian Service and Oil Nationalization

After the war, a period of reform and democratization ensued in Iran. With the departure of Reza Shah the parliament became increasingly a major centre of decision-making.

Independence from foreign powers became the order of the day. The Anglo Iranian Oil Company – a major tool of British control of Iran's OIL reserves became the first target.

Throughout the 40's the British Government had problems persuading the Iranian Government to continue with its exceptional concessions on oil to the AIOC.

According to an agreement between the AIOC and the Iranian Government signed in 1933, the AIOC had "the exclusive rights within the territory [south of Iran] of the Concessions to search and extract petroleum, as well as refine or treat it with any other manner and render suitable for commerce the petroleum obtained by it." The bulk of profits would belong to the AIOC as well as most of the rights about how the company was to be run. A token annual royalty and a small share in the profits were for Iran.

Facing the demand for nationalization, the British were referring to article 21 of the Agreement which stated categorically that: **"This [exceptional] Concession shall not be annulled by the Persian Government and the terms therein contained shall not be altered."**

The reformist movement and the National Front Party led by Dr. Mossadeq – by now the Prime Minister of Iran in 1951-- **thought otherwise.**

The National Front newspaper, Keshvar, had a lead article in its February 1950 issue, directly addressing the British Prime Minister:

“How can Mr. Atlee have the right of nationalizing British heavy industries and we cannot have the right to nationalize our oil industry? He must know 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.”¹⁵

In the heat of the problems between the two Governments, there is a revealing document showing how the BBC was brought in to help.

On the 1st of March 1951, Mr. Furlong, the UK representative, who had just visited Iran, writes to Mr. Serpel at the Treasury and Mr. Butler at the Ministry of Fuel and Power suggesting a BBC talk on the subject.

“Sir Francis Shepherded [of the UK embassy in Teheran] has suggested, and we agree, that **it would be useful to inspire the BBC’s Persian broadcasts to stress on certain points** 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 to show the impracticality of nationalization and the financial and other losses which any such move may involve.”¹⁶

The memorandum suggests seven lines of argument -- including the financial losses for Iran, the harm to Iran’s international reputation, and the adverse effects on the industry if the British leave. All these 7 points are later picked up in a

¹⁵ (FO371/91523, 16 February 1951)

¹⁶ (FO371-91523/EP1531/68)

BBC talk published three days later on 4 March just before the vote for nationalization in Iran's Parliament. Parts of the talk read as follows – There is NO NAME for the BBC Talks writer in the document:

“In the first place it must be remembered that the Anglo-Iranian oil company has invested vast sums of money...the arbitrary cancellation of the oil Agreement and the failure to honor an international agreement would seriously damage Persian credit and reputation in the world, more so if ... it would be difficult to see how Persia thinks of paying a huge sum to which an international tribunal would certainly consider the company entitled... and there is the company's expenditure of tens of millions of pounds...”¹⁷

It is NOT exactly clear how this inter-play worked and whether those points would have been made by any analyst or not. However, it is interesting that such direct commands were made.

In a memo entitled the **“line for News Department and the BBC”** the British Embassy in Teheran suggests the following points on how to PORTRAY Mossadeq:

These points, written out in full detail, were given to the BBC following a briefing at the Foreign Office at 5:30 on 19 March 1953. It included the following lines:

1. Minimum comment about the AIOC.
2. Stress that Mossadeq has rejected a fair and equitable settlement.
3. Stress that the Proposal was Anglo-American.
4. Stress that Mossadeq was invited to cooperate but he refused.

¹⁷ [full text in FO371/91524/EP1531/122 Nationalization of Oil by BBC Diplomatic Correspondent]

5. Mossadeq's speech offered inaccurate information on compensation figure and revenues.
6. There was no undue burden on the economy of Persia.
7. Make absolutely no comment on counter proposals.
8. Avoid issuing the text of Compensation Agreement...¹⁸

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

“BBC was the voice of British Imperialism and we did not trust it.”¹⁹

Shahrokh Golestan, an Iranian journalist says in the same series:

“BBC broadcasts contained frequent attacks on Mossadeq's Government. The analysis was always one sided. There were two Englishmen who used to write the analysis. I can't remember their names. They constantly rejected Mossadeq's policies as being inadequate. I remember that their reports always ended by this sentence: the adverse effects will most probably be for Iran.”²⁰

L.P. Elwell-Sutton – who used to work in the AIOC and also worked in the Persian Service of the BBC – writing in his book, *Persian Oil, A Study in Power Politics*, treats the BBC commentary skeptically:

¹⁸ (FO371/7188633-EP1531/228)

¹⁹ BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th Anniversary of the Persian Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor.

²⁰ Ibid

“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.”²¹

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

“Colin Reid, Walter Farr and Peter Webb, British United Press reporter, White and myself as regulars from the Abadan corps; soon to be reinforced with Douglas Willis, of the BBC. Alan Clarke of London’s Daily Herald, John Fisher of Kemsley Group, Bob Long, Associated Press of America, Flora Lewis of London’s Observer and her husband Sydney Gruson of the New York Times, Homer Bigart, Pulitzer-winner of the New York Herald-Tribune, Jacques Marcus of the AFP, and newsreel cameraman Robert Hecox were among correspondents who sailed to Abadan during weeks of lax political tension in the capital.”²²

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

²¹ (L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil, A Study in Power Politics*, Lawrence & Wishard Ltd, 1955, pp241-2)

²² (Norman Kemp, *Abadan, A first-hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis*, first published 1953 by Allan Wingate (Publishers), PP144-5)

“They always told us what to say and how to say it. When it came to reporting adversely on Mossadeq suddenly for two weeks all Iranian broadcasters disappeared. They had no choice but to bring in English people who spoke Persian, because Iranians had gone on strike. The broadcasts were all in a Persian with a strong English accent.”²³

Another BBC Persian broadcaster, Abbas Dehghan, says in his interview with the Persian Service that although the broadcasts were mainly translations of British analysis and even the satire and cultural programs were written by the British and translated by the Persian broadcasters, the situation was different when it came to Mossadeq:

“No Iranian was prepared to say anything against Mossadeq. Nobody would be disrespectful of Mossadeq.”²⁴

Elwell Sutton takes the side of BBC Persian broadcasters:

“This radio propaganda was every bit as offensive...No wonder the BBC’s Persian announcers on several occasions patriotically refused to speak the lines handed to them! British propaganda services, on instructions from the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office, attempted to whitewash Britain’s record in Persia by plugging the work of British scholars in the Persian language...”²⁵

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

²³ (BBC Persian Service Archives, 65th Anniversary of the BBC Persian Service, Produced by Shahryar Radpoor)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid

“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.”²⁶

3. The Persian Service and the Islamic Revolution of 1979

The BBC Persian Service rose to unprecedented prominence in the years leading to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. We do not as yet have access to FCO documents of the lead to the Revolution. However, many of those working in the BBC during this period have given their own testimony.

One of the common assertions amongst Iranians who were anti-Islamic Revolution is that the BBC would tend to be ahead of the news in Iran.

It is asserted that the BBC would announce demonstrations before they were announced in Iran. I asked one of the most senior broadcasters of the Persian section during the years leading up to the Revolution, Lutfali Khonji, why the listeners had such impressions. Mr.Khonji says:

“Those working in the BBC had their own set of contacts. I was one of the main links for the National Front and as such my friends would pass on the relevant news on developments. Improved communications techniques meant that the BBC could be heard far better in Europe and through the BBC broadcasts and the Iranian Diaspora were increasingly involved in the struggle for democracy in Iran. Another element that increased news coverage was

²⁶ www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmfaff/80/80ap01.htm

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

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

“At the time interviewing was done with great technical difficulty. We had to book studios and lines. I also had to speak to several contacts before convincing them of the justifications for the interview. Nevertheless, soon after arriving in the studio, Mark Dodd, the head of BBC WS arrived in the studio. I don’t even know who had informed him that I was doing this interview. He barred me from interviewing and said we should not “artificially blow the events out of proportion”²⁸

Mr. Khonji uses this as an example to reject the common belief that the BBC was supporting the Islamic revolution in Iran.

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

“I suggested to Khomeini to give an interview to BBC assuring him that they will broadcast exactly what he says. Khomeini rejected saying “BBC belongs to the British and it will not benefit us to give them an interview”. I convinced him when I said all the other media you give

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ ibid

interviews to, are also all foreign so what is the difference. Khomeini then accepted.”²⁹

However, all Iranian supporters of the Shah regard the BBC’s role most skeptically. In a revealing account of Shah’s perception of events in “The Shah’s Story” published in 1980 by Michael Joseph Ltd., he blames the BBC strongly:

“From the beginning of 1978 their [BBC’s] 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.”³⁰

The Iranian Ambassador to the UK, Parviz Radji, catalogues in his book “In the Service of the Peacock Throne” in his memoirs covering June 1976 to end of January 1979, the number of times meetings took place between him and the Managing Director of BBC External Services as well as Ian Trethowan, the Director General of BBC and Mark Dodd, Head of BBC’s Eastern Service.

It is clear from these accounts that the Shah is cabling frequently his anger at BBC Persian Service’s reporting. BBC’s Mark Dodd always insists that the BBC is happy to say both sides of the story.

As we get closer to the revolution, the matter gets out of hand. Radji’s account of 19 April 1978 reads as follows:

“The [Foreign Ministers] session breaks up and the British Foreign Minister, David Owen, walks up to me followed by our FM 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

²⁹ (BBC Persian Service Archives, program for the 65th anniversary of the Service, produced by Shahryar Radpoor)

³⁰ (Ibid p163)

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.”³¹

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

“Seyyed Hussein Nasr, the new head of the Empress’s Private Bureau comes to see me at the office. Although he doesn’t quite say so, I gather he is in London to make use of his university contacts to enlist pressure from academic circles against the BBC.”³²

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

“David Alliance, a successful Iranian businessman, now resident in Manchester, comes to tell me that, through his influential contacts in the business community in London, he is bringing pressure on to the BBC to tone down their Persian broadcasts.”³³

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

“The BBC representative has been summoned to the Ministry tomorrow to explain his misrepresentation of

³¹ (Ibid, p167)

³² (Ibid, p270)

³³ (Ibid, p252)

facts in reporting the money transfers. For your information his expulsion seems probable.”³⁴

So, it is clear that official and non-official pressure was being put on the BBC Persian Service to tone down its reporting on the events that led to the revolution.

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

It is important to wait and check the documents of the FCO and the BBC archives for the relations during the years leading to the 1979 Revolution.

Until then we have to accept what the BBC World Service has argued openly, especially since the 1990 when it was led by John Tusa that “cultural diplomacy” was an inherently worthwhile activity for the British public service broadcaster to pursue. For John Tusa, the BBC WS has never been “propaganda”, but journalism equally relevant to populations all over the world, regardless of information environment in their respective societies. ³⁵And, the BBC WS does not hide the fact that it has to take into consideration Government’s international priorities. It says in its own web site:

³⁴ (Ibid, p271)

³⁵ Cited in BriaMc Nair, News and Journalism in the UK, p150)

“The Foreign Office funds the BBC World Service. While the World Service has complete editorial and managerial independence, we are able to gain an understanding of the international priorities of the UK Government as one component (though not the sole determinant) of setting our strategy. Therefore, we engage in regular sharing of information with the FCO.”³⁶

³⁶ (The Foreign and Commonwealth Office/BBC World Service Broadcasting Agreement, June 17th 2002)