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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Houcine Msaddek nous a quittés brutalement durant la relecture et le travail éditorial pour la publication de ce numéro. Nous avons décidé de publier son travail, avec quelques modifications éditoriales afin de correspondre aux critères de la revue.

## Introduction and conceptual framework

- 1 International radio broadcasting stands out as one of the earliest and most common institutions involved with cultural production to be used by nation-states for the purpose of projecting a favourable picture of themselves abroad. This first occurred in the interwar period under the guise of crude state-orchestrated propaganda. More recently the idea of national projection came to be repackaged as the trendier idea of *soft power*, also called *public diplomacy*, with international radio broadcasting remaining the most prominent tool to carry it out until the early 1990s.
- 2 The art of influencing international audiences was referred to as *public diplomacy* for the first time by American diplomat Edmund Gullion in the mid-1960s. This was considered a timely alternative to the term *propaganda*, which had acquired negative connotations. By the time the phrase *soft power* came into use in the early 1990s, the notion of reaching out to foreign audiences to influence them needed to be reinvented in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR. Stephen Nye, who coined the term, defines it as “the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment”.

- 3 In Britain, a similar concept can be traced back to the early 1930s in a short pamphlet entitled *The Projection of England*<sup>1</sup> written by Stephen Tallents, a civil servant involved in the burgeoning public relations industry. Neither of the two American concepts appear in British scholarly literature before 1995. Prior to that, the term used in successive parliamentary reports or any other authorised assessment of British foreign policy had always been *cultural diplomacy*. The new trend of embracing American terminology was noticed only by the time the term *soft power* had become something of a buzzword and *public diplomacy* started to adapt to the new era of digital revolution and social networks. Amidst these recent developments, *soft power* now covers an extensive range of activities that go well beyond cultural production. Consequently, international broadcasting as soft power was weakened after it had played a leading role throughout a major part of the twentieth century.
- 4 Unsurprisingly, in the UK, the BBC World Service was expected to fulfil this role when it was set up in 1932 under the title of Empire Service, although the target audience at the time was limited to the English-speaking diaspora. The objective of projection was not implemented until the Corporation undertook its first foray into foreign language broadcasting six years later. Meanwhile, in an attempt to counter the growing international radio broadcasting propaganda of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, British foreign policymakers recommended the creation of foreign language units within the BBC. Obviously, Arabic was the most relevant, since Radio Bari and Radio Berlin were broadcasting mainly in Arabic with the avowed aim of harming British Middle East interests. This is how BBC Arabic, founded on 3 January 1938, emerged as the Corporation's oldest foreign language service and the largest up to the present day. Throughout the decades, BBC Arabic has always held a central position in the development of UK public diplomacy. British efforts to reach hearts and minds in the Arab world regained momentum at the end of 1937 when negotiations between the Foreign Office and the BBC's first Director-General, John Reith, resulted in an agreement to cooperate for the sake of "national interest". Reith's attempts to promote a distinguished model of public service broadcasting in the region had begun earlier in Egypt and Palestine. The launch of the Cairo and Jerusalem stations was carried out in partnership with the wireless technology inventor and entrepreneur, Guglielmo Marconi, but without any interference from the Foreign Office, both countries being under British colonial rule at the time.
- 5 A thorough scrutiny of their position as a UK key soft power resource might yield a wealth of data about propaganda which is the essential counterpart to censorship. Indeed, propaganda and censorship have often been seen as two sides of the same coin.<sup>2</sup> Basically, censors suppress specific information and ideas whereas propagandists supply information and symbols in order to persuade, often providing a misleading picture. Hence, regardless of the subtleties and reservations often put forward about propaganda in Britain, the discussions initiated in the mid-1930s by the BBC and the Foreign Office to launch overseas services within the public body are a case in point. This paper sets out to assess to what extent a foreign language section of the BBC was involved in propaganda or some form of silencing.
- 6 I will, first of all, dwell on these discussions and their lasting effects on the following decades. To shed light on censorship and blind spots in connection with the BBC as a soft power resource, I will investigate the Arabic Service's coverage of three critical moments in British foreign policy in the Middle East. The 1956 Suez conflict and the

1991 Gulf war belong respectively to the post war and post-Cold War contexts. Set in colonial times, the first moment focuses on the first news bulletin ever broadcast in a foreign language when John Reith oversaw in person the enforcement of his model of international public service broadcasting. This model revolved around accurate and impartial news and the safeguarding of the Corporation's independence from government. Reith insisted that the same principles should apply to external broadcasting and be made the cornerstone of credibility for the nascent foreign language service.

- 7 In addition to a wide range of secondary sources, this paper mainly draws on BBC Arabic's former journalists' memoirs and the interviews they have given to Radio Memory, a programme the Service dedicated in 2018 to its own eightieth anniversary and again more recently to the Corporation's centenary preparations, also transcribed and available on the Service's website. Although those findings should be viewed with caution due to potential flaws such as failing memory or a tendency to romanticize facts, they are certainly proof that the BBC World Service's diasporic broadcasters contributed significantly to the Corporation's self-narrative and sense of its own history.

## 1. John Reith's perception of international broadcasting

- 8 In sponsoring the setting up of national radio stations in Egypt and Palestine in 1934 and 1936 respectively, on the model of British public broadcasting, John Reith was certainly a forerunner of British cultural diplomacy through foreign language radio broadcasting. Initially the Foreign Office showed no great interest in his efforts and refused to finance a similar project within the Corporation itself. There was also opposition from the Empire Service on the grounds that it would harm the BBC's reputation of credibility because the use of languages other than English would sound propagandistic. Even as late as 1937, when discussions aimed at finding the most adequate response to Radio Bari were finally decided upon by the government, the BBC was not invited to take part. The Foreign Office seemed wary of its independence from government by virtue of its Royal Charter and seriously envisaged setting up its own overseas stations, independently of the BBC, notably in Cyprus, to reach the Middle East.
- 9 Eventually, on 4 October 1937, John Reith was requested to attend a Cabinet Sub-committee meeting in which he reiterated the BBC's case for foreign language broadcasting. In that meeting, the Foreign Office insisted that in the case of Arabic, the newscast should be different.<sup>3</sup> The Director-General of the BBC was fully aware that government funding was contingent upon the idea of representing the "national interest" and so, as he wrote in his memo to the sub-committee, "The BBC might have to show more elasticity and perhaps be more amenable to Foreign Office views than in the case of other than Arabic language".<sup>4</sup>
- 10 These discussions resulted in the BBC accepting to handle British projection "responsibly", by resorting to omission of news, which, in the view of the Foreign Office, would be inadvisable in times of crisis. In return, the Service would receive adequate additional financing and guarantees regarding control over broadcasting content. But was it binding? As a matter of fact, there was no written agreement and

Reith knew the futility of trusting Foreign Office promises. He nevertheless accepted what Donald R. Browne dubbed a “gentlemen’s agreement” which would prevail for decades to come. In an insightful paper on the BBC’s entry in shortwave broadcasting, Browne wondered why John Reith wanted “the new service so badly, even to the point of being willing to take it on with no guarantee of increased budget and no assurances of freedom from Foreign Office interference”.<sup>5</sup> His determination was put forward as the main reason, which, Asa Briggs, a leading authority on Reith, confirms.<sup>6</sup> Reith’s doggedness might also be due to his political ambitions, as John Reith did enter Churchill’s wartime Cabinet and served as Minister of Information.

- 11 If the BBC entered international broadcasting almost on its own initiative, paradoxically, the Foreign Office soon proved keener than the BBC itself to exploit the Corporation’s credibility, which had been earned at home, in the field of emerging shortwave propaganda broadcasting. In the wake of the Second World War, license fee revenue was reintroduced in financing all the Corporation’s units except the External services. The grant-in-aid was consciously meant to keep the BBC subject to Treasury pressure and Foreign Office whims. The power to decide which specific languages were to be used and the number of hours they should broadcast per day was also held by the Foreign Office.
- 12 Three civil servants were involved in with John Reith’s international broadcasting model: Stephen Tallents whose pioneering publicity work helped introduce public relations at the BBC and who was influential in convincing the Corporation to adopt the projection policy; Kingsley Woods, Postmaster General from 1931 to June 1935, was given the task of reorganising the Post Office, turning it into a public utility independent from government and then asking Reith to enhance the scheme in the BBC. The third, Robert Furness (1883-1954), served as Deputy Director-General of Egyptian State Broadcasting and was Press Officer to the Government of Palestine in 1934. John Reith approached him for his expertise in Arabic. As Louis Allday asserts,<sup>7</sup> Furness put forward a nuanced proposal that led to the creation of a modern media Arabic that quickly characterised BBC Arabic broadcasts and was ultimately adopted by various Arab national stations.
- 13 Like John Reith, all three were nourished by Matthew Arnold’s tradition of *high culture* and a paternalist vision of educating the masses.
- 14 Renewable every ten years, the BBC Royal Charter was extended to the External services for the first time in 1946.
- 15 What distinguished Reith’s model of public service international broadcasting from previous and subsequent experiments elsewhere is that other than its presumed impartiality and distance from direct government influence, it also contained an inclusive vision of cultural interchange towards its foreign audiences. John Reith held to these ideals so much that he sought to convey the spirit of the Corporation’s well-known triptych, “to inform, educate and entertain” into the external services. Relying on archival evidence, Andrea Stanton shows that in 1938, BBC Arabic relied on the Palestine Broadcasting Service in Jerusalem and the Egyptian State Broadcasting in Cairo for human resources, programming and other forms of expertise.<sup>8</sup>
- 16 Along the same line of thought, evidence given in 1987 to a Foreign Affairs Committee on *Cultural Diplomacy* reads:
 

“The Arab world has come to regard the BBC Arabic Service in certain important senses as an Arab broadcasting network in its own right [...] because it describes the

world seen from London as comprehensively and impartially as is humanly possible.”<sup>9</sup>

- 17 The same evidence stressed the key role the Service’s diasporic broadcasters played in the success of the Reithian model of international broadcasting: “for nearly fifty years the Arab-speaking staff of the BBC have been consistently striving, with notable success, to have their service perceived as a major Arabic-language radio station.”<sup>10</sup>
- 18 Broadcaster Fouad Abdel-Razak, who entered Bush House (BBC World Service headquarters) in 1986, remembers that it was impossible for new recruits to go up to the microphone and say, “here is London, the BBC, until six months after you were trained on that”. Abdel-Razek, who was assigned the task of launching *Radio Memory* of which he produced 62 episodes in 2018, mentions a gem he stumbled upon in the Corporation’s archives that consists of a recording of the great singer Umm Kulthum addressing her Egyptian fellow citizens from the BBC podium : “my great people” as if she was a queen and greeting the “patron of art and artists, the late king Faruk”.<sup>11</sup> In another episode he discusses former broadcaster Hassan El-Karmi and his answers to listeners on his famous programme *Kawlon Ala Kawl (Say on Say)*. When he retired after forty years of *Say on Say*, Elkarmi patiently transcribed and printed all the recordings of his programme.
- 19 In the final analysis, John Reith’s immediate aim in 1937 was to win his model of international public service broadcasting a large following among “Arab café audiences, (who) sipped their coffee and swallowed Italian propaganda with every mouthful”, as Cullum A. MacDonald has put it.<sup>12</sup> He was nonetheless willing, in the long run, to adapt it to the enduring dogma of *realpolitik* so that whenever necessary, the BBC would turn a blind eye to its funders’ propaganda or censorship, especially when the stakes for Britain in the Middle East were high: a “*this-for-that*” exchange culture this paper will explore throughout BBC Arabic’s history.
- 20 The three historical moments to be scrutinised here are expected to shed light on the BBC’s relations with the British government.

## 2. The row over the inaugural Arabic broadcast

- 21 When it aired its first news bulletin on 3 January 1938, the BBC Arabic Service provoked an upheaval in British political influence in the Middle East. Amidst the chorus of congratulations received in the wake of that inaugural transmission, Broadcasting House was also swamped with a torrent of disapproving, concerned and grudging messages from various positions on the political spectrum in Westminster and Whitehall, as well as from a number of diplomatic posts in the region. All of it because of a short but intensely irritating news item that overshadowed a barely sixty-minute daily transmission, for the daily airing time during the Service’s first year was quite modest. The bulletin that caused such a profound and far-reaching effect described incidents in a Mandatory Palestine under a daily state of emergency:
- “A small battle took place yesterday between a police force and an armed band at Safad [...] A train travelling in the hills near Jerusalem was fired at. [...] The IPC [Iraq Petroleum Company] pipeline was damaged [...] A section of railway track was removed today near Jerusalem, but was discovered before any trains passed over”.<sup>13</sup>
- 22 Then came the most infuriating item:

“Another Arab from Palestine was executed by hanging at Acre this morning by order of a military court. He was arrested during recent riots in the Hebron Mountains and was found to possess a rifle and some ammunition”.<sup>14</sup>

23 The news item was broadcast while a strict British censorship during the uprising ensured that Palestinian newspapers were closed for long periods of time thus preventing them from any critical commentary on British military activities. In April 1936, the Arab Palestinians launched a countrywide revolt against British rule and its official policy of support for Jewish immigration to the country. The rebellion reached its peak in 1938, before dying out by 1939 with the approaching war in Europe. This was a substantial revolt requiring the deployment of a remarkably large British force. The British government appointed a royal commission headed by Lord Peel in October 1936. On 7 July 1937, the Peel commission recommended the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The incidents and subsequent executions mentioned in the news bulletin arguably meet the definition of atrocity, according to historian Mathew Hughes.<sup>15</sup> They have not been widely discussed over the decades but they do appear in printed primary records and in subsequent TV programmes, an episode of BBC 1 *Timewatch* entitled “*Palestine: The First Intifada*”, broadcast on 27 March 1991, being the most notable. Such an instant announcement on a wireless transmission aimed at that very region was highly embarrassing for the colonial authorities and the Foreign Office alike.

24 The skirmishes between the BBC and the British Government over that inaugural broadcast might be seen as the pioneering embodiment of John Reith’s vision of “national projection”. On the face it, the Corporation did not hide its satisfaction as George Rendel, one of its senior officials, asserted: “the fact that we had not concealed this item of news was a guarantee of our statement that our news would be straight news, and not carefully selected for the audience”.<sup>16</sup> Then he added: “However, we are now faced with the great difficulty that practically all news from Palestine must be intensely painful to the Arabs and can only send our stock down still further in the Middle East”.<sup>17</sup> J.B. Clark, Director of the Empire Service, objected to the Foreign Office’s protests and anger, saying:

“The omission of unwelcome facts of news and the consequent suppression of truth runs counter to the Corporation’s policy laid down by appropriate authority. If external bodies wish the Corporation to modify an established policy, under which I have been directed to guide our new Service, suitable representations should be made in the appropriate quarter”.<sup>18</sup>

25 Yet, the BBC could not merely wave the principle of independence from government as an impassable red line. The founder of the British Council, Reginald Leeper, who in early 1938 was assistant under secretary of state with a special brief for propaganda, wondered ironically: “Is the BBC to broadcast to the Empire the execution of every Arab in Palestine? It seems to me unnecessary, though I suspect that it gives their conscience a warm glow.” Peter Partner in his book, *Arab Voices*, reports that a week later Reginald Leeper mentioned a severe warning he had addressed to Clark and his aides in the new foreign language service:

“I reminded them to their undertaking to work in the closest touch with the Foreign Office in connection with the Arabic broadcasts, which had to be regarded as something quite separate from Home and Empire news. I also emphasised the need for selection and omission of news ... In general I think the BBC are ready to fall in with our wishes, but it may take time to get things working smoothly”.<sup>19</sup>



- 26 Indeed, an agreement was reached in a matter of days. It insisted that translations of Arabic news bulletins would be sent daily to the Foreign Office. Fortnightly liaison meetings were also agreed on.

### 3. The 1956 Suez Crisis: dark spots in the coverage of a nine-day war

- 27 On 26 July 1956 the Egyptian President, Jamal Abdul-Nasser, announced the nationalisation of the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company. In the wider Cold War context, the vital Suez trade route was seen at the time as a strategic bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa and an invaluable key to British security and oil supplies. While the crisis lasted for six months, actual warfare (dubbed in the Arab media as the *Tripartite Aggression*, referring to Britain's flawed secret plan with France and Israel for military action) did not exceed nine days. The United States issued warnings to the three nations to abandon their campaign and withdraw from Egyptian soil, which they did by late December. For British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, the Suez crisis ended not just in failure but also in humiliation and loss of office.
- 28 Coming from the Americans, it was a bitter pill to swallow for the British. As a matter of fact, the Foreign Office's misconception was that the presumed "special relationship" meant a shared agreement on regional policy.
- 29 The Anglo-American tensions also affected international radio broadcasting. Alleged American assistance in the expansion of Egyptian radio facilities in the mid-1950s<sup>20</sup> was regarded by the British government as the last straw. The Prime Minister was so desperate that his decisions were increasingly reminiscent of First World War censorship. His first moves targeted the BBC. In fact, the pressure exerted on the Corporation by the Foreign Office had become persistent much earlier in the decade in so far as British Middle Eastern policies were concerned. According to a CIA report on Iraq in 1950, BBC Arabic broadcasts were "characterised by Iraqis as propaganda, while BBC English news bulletins were highly trusted".<sup>21</sup> This mistrust and bias in reporting increased during the Suez crisis. The interviews and memoirs of prominent 1950s Arabic Service broadcasters describe a collective withdrawal, on the first day of the war, of the numerous staff members originally from Egypt. As for the star announcer Muneer Shemma, his memoir describes a more spectacular resignation.<sup>22</sup> But, still, Anthony Eden did not hide his dissatisfaction with the Corporation's coverage in the region and wanted it to take a more partisan stance. As usual, government pressure on the BBC took the form of threats of cuts to the *grant-in aid*. Yet, the results fell short of Eden's expectations. The Corporation stuck to its oath of impartiality. The "gentlemen's agreement", for once, did not seem to work, which led the Foreign office to resort to a policy of investing in government-owned "sleep stations", "at the ready" for times of crisis. Obviously, Anthony Eden's lack of trust in the BBC during the Suez crisis pushed him to turn to black radio broadcasting. The long-standing Cyprus-based *Sharq al-Adna* was renamed the *Voice of Britain* and was given substantial funding to enhance its anti-Nasser campaign. This propaganda station operated under the control of British military and intelligence services, although the Foreign Office kept the BBC informed about its developments, at times asking for technical, administrative and programming assistance.<sup>23</sup> The IRD and MI6 received unprecedented instructions from the Prime

Minister to counter Egypt's pan-Arab messages instead of exclusively attacking the communists over the Budapest Spring. Ultimately, the Foreign Office lost patience with the BBC when the Corporation and the *Voice of Britain* transmitted contradictory information to the Arab world because both stations used the same wave frequency.

- 30 Following the declassification of Government documents in the mid-1990s, there is no doubt now about British attempts to co-opt Arab radio stations under its control as part of its international propaganda efforts in the 1950s. Other than the use of the facilities of the Iraqi national Radio Station, those of Jordan's official Hashemite Broadcasting Station led to the launching of the short-lived Radio Ramallah in early 1956. Such efforts aimed at sustaining a vigorous counter-propaganda campaign against Egypt and creating a direct competitor with its hugely popular *Voice of the Arabs* station. The most striking fact about the short-lived Anglo-Jordanian broadcasting station in Ramallah was the surprising decision to hire Yunis Bahri (1904-1979) as the station's top propagandist. As announcer of German Arabic radio during the Second World War, Bahri had engaged in sharp anti-British rhetoric in remote duels with Muneer Shemma of BBC Arabic. Bahri was sentenced to death in *absentia* by the British-controlled Iraqi authorities in late 1939. Yet, to his employers' disappointment, Bahri's trademark tirade *Hayia Al Arab* was not a spectacular success among an overwhelmingly pro-Egypt Jordanian population. Nor were they more popular among a wider Arab audience when re-broadcast by Britain's *Sharq al-Adna* facility.
- 31 Presumably, the political significance of the Suez debacle accredits, a few years in advance, Dean Acheson's well-known observation, made during a speech at the Military Academy, West Point, on 5 December 1962, that "Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role".<sup>24</sup> As for its impact on British public diplomacy, it is quite obvious that Eden's botched attempt at "*hard power*" resulted in a great deal of collateral damage to the reputation of the widely admired British conception of *soft power* built around the BBC's earliest overseas service of which, ironically, Anthony Eden in person, then Foreign Secretary, was a privileged witness. His utterly failed foreign policies in 1956 ironically echoed his own theory of *straight diplomacy* in 1937 when he said: "It is perfectly true, of course, that cultural propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by a bad foreign policy".<sup>25</sup>

## 4. Silences and censorship in the 1991 Gulf war coverage

- 32 On 2 August 1990, the Iraqi army invaded neighbouring Kuwait, prompting outrage from the international community. The United Nations set 5 January 1991 as a deadline for withdrawal of Iraqi forces. The deadline passed and the following day a twenty-nine member US-led and UN-backed coalition went into action. After weeks of heavy bombardment, Iraq agreed to all UN resolutions to end the conflict and an armistice was signed on 11 April 1991. During the conflict the BBC found itself facing a competitor of a new kind: around-the-clock news TV channel CNN which viewed the war as an opportunity for a historic commercial breakthrough.
- 33 To address competition, the Arabic Service cleared its schedules to become for the first time, a rolling news and comment channel. It was granted five extra hours of daily broadcast and its eighty strong staff (the second busiest at the World Service after the

English-language unit) had to work harder to safeguard a long-standing reputation of credibility and impartiality that would suddenly be shaken and thrown into question. Since Britain was now at war with an Arab nation, the Corporation was bound to invoke the “gentlemen’s agreement” with the Foreign Office. The latter informally suggested the Arabic Service remain silent on Britain’s role as a main belligerent in the build-up to the war. Instead, in its news bulletins, the Arab League, the United-States and the UN were put forward as the obvious actors of the invasion and restitution of Kuwait.

34 While the domestic Service and the English unit of the World Service did not show much enthusiasm about lending a strong hand to the frenzied media chorus in favour of warmongering, they nonetheless had to follow military reporting guidelines issued by the Ministry of Defence —like all British media— even if the Corporation denied any Government effort to influence coverage. During this war the press was shown what the government and military thought was fit. The embed system which was implemented for the first time, and the daily briefings of General Norman Schwarzkopf, left little room for reporters to investigate for themselves. Conversely, for the Arabic service the issue of impartiality became more complex. The war polarized the Service’s audience into two opposing sides both accusing the BBC of favouring the other side. In an effort to show a balanced stand, BBC Arabic regularly broadcast reports of what Baghdad was saying as well as news from the British anti-war movement. Furthermore, broadcasters on BBC Arabic avoided referring to the Gulf as “the Persian Gulf” or even simply as “the Gulf”, as was the case on the domestic service. Instead, they knowingly called it “the Arabian Gulf”. On the other hand, the Service had to drop its usual news analysis and tried to reduce its role to mere reporting, especially when events on the ground were likely to worsen the polarisation of its audience.

35 However, one particular event drew anonymous indignation. Not just the event, but also the way the BBC reported it: the American army air raid that destroyed a bomb shelter in the Baghdad suburb of Amiriah on 13 February 1991. 408 civilians were killed in the attack. Although they recognised that the site had been used as a bomb shelter during the Iran-Iraq war, Americans said it was a command-and-control bunker. What shocked most with regard to the heavy toll of civilian casualties was the indecent praise of so-called laser-guided smart bombs used in the attack and the clean precision bombing rhetoric. BBC correspondent, Jeremy Brown, was one of the first television reporters on the scene. He was given access to the site and found no evidence of military use. When he reported live from the Iraqi capital, the news presenter in London gave the impression he believed the US military claim and doubted Brown’s account. He asked him whether he could be absolutely sure there was no military equipment in the shelter. Brown replied that he could only report what he could see. To Brown’s obvious disappointment, the presenter cut off the report and turned to the viewers asserting that Brown was of course subject to Iraq’s reporting restrictions.<sup>26</sup>

36 As for the Arabic Service’s diasporic broadcasters, they soon became subject to suspicion. Or so it seemed to the *New York Times* reporter when he quoted the Deputy Head of the Service:

“News bulletins from the central newsroom, which we translated into Arabic by the unit were translated back into English to see if a slant had been added in Arabic. We monitored our current affairs output from August to Christmas. In the end, we found it was all-pretty straight, but we needed to do it”.<sup>27</sup>

- 37 More anecdotally, when the reporter asked: “what, if anything was omitted these days? The senior staff replied: ‘Impossibly cheerful love songs [...] And Western rock music—not because it’s Western; it’s just inappropriate’”.<sup>28</sup>
- 38 Abdel Razek Hijawi, a former diasporic broadcaster of the Service during the crisis, provides a different version of events with regard to the institution’s confidence in its native members of staff. He claims he gave an interview to the dissident Speaker of the Kuwaiti Parliament who was in London when Iraq was occupying Kuwait. In this interview the dissident politician criticised the Kuwaiti government and the Emir. As news director, Abdel Razek Hijawi says that he broadcast it although he admits it was an editorial mistake considering the principle of “national interest”:
- “I admit an editorial mistake here, but I do not regret it: I should have consulted Sami Haddad, director of news programs, and I did not. This on my part was snappy, but I suspect if I had consulted him he would have decided to avoid the headache. (...)
- I was in a training course and it was supervised by a recently retired BBC journalist. He saw me from the Arabic section and said to me: Hurray! You are the ones who caused all this headache because of the interview with the Speaker of the Kuwaiti Parliament! He didn’t know I was personally responsible. And the man added: The interview was translated into English and studied at the highest levels, because the Foreign Office had conveyed its objections and the objections of the Kuwaitis to the interview. Importantly, it was decided in the end that the interview had no written problem.
- I was happy that the senior officials took over the response to the external authorities themselves without consulting us. No one in the Arabic Service knew of the headache caused by the interview. That is the BBC at its best.”
- 39 Taken at face value, the account seems gently steeped in the Reithian model of public service broadcasting. Yet, the former broadcaster’s depiction of the “national interest” in times of crisis seems to ignore the most obscure layers of the so-called “gentlemen’s agreement”.

## Conclusion

- 40 The long history of the BBC World Service as *soft power* vehicle has been anything but a bed of roses. However jealous of its independence and its widely respected and trusted international broadcasting, the BBC did come to a number of dubious agreements with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office regarding the Middle East. In October 1968, while UK foreign policymakers were concerned about the government’s decision to withdraw British military forces from ‘east of Suez’, the Information Research Department (IRD), a shadowy section created within the Foreign Office in 1948 to fight the propaganda battle with the Soviet Union, persuaded news agency Reuters to set up a reporting service in the Middle East, funding it secretly via the BBC. It was not until January 2020 that the Corporation finally made the secret deal public in a short article on its website following the disclosure, a few days earlier, of the relevant documents at the National Archives headquarters in Kew. The article reads: “an ‘unorthodox’ plan was hatched which involved the BBC paying ‘enhanced subscriptions’ to Reuters for access to its news copy, on the basis that the Treasury would then compensate the BBC’s government-funded international services for the extra cost”, insisting that only three then senior BBC staff were to know the real purpose of the scheme.<sup>29</sup>

- 41 Often treated as peripheral in public service broadcasting studies, the BBC World Service has contributed immensely to the Corporation's well-established reputation. The Corporation's international broadcasting model, imagined by its founding father in the 1930s, has proved resilient. Despite its blind spots over the decades, the BBC still holds a prominent position as global *soft power*.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article's rationale is that the Arabic Service of the BBC holds a special position in the development of British public diplomacy and that such a position has its roots in the 1937 negotiations between the BBC and the Foreign Office that led to its creation in 1938. These discussions resulted in the BBC's willingness to handle the task of British projection responsibly, that is to say resorting to the omission of news which in the view of the Foreign Office would be inadvisable in times of crisis. The article seeks to show that this non-written agreement prevailed in the following six decades and is still valid up to the present day.

The paper investigates the coverage of three moments of crisis in the history of British foreign policies in the Middle East. The first moment concerns the controversial news bulletin of 4 January 1938, the very first BBC broadcast in a foreign language. The other two moments relate to the Suez crisis and the first Gulf war.

The article's main line of inquiry therefore is to offer specific insights into the notion of soft power mediated by diasporic Arab broadcasters in circumstances when the stakes were high for Britain in the Middle East. The aim is to assess both the resilience and the ambiguities of John Reith's vision of British projection through a model of broadcasting of his own making in a sensitive and complex region for the country's formal diplomacy.

Le Service arabe de la BBC occupe une position particulière dans l'émergence et les mutations de la « diplomatie culturelle » britannique. La question d'étendre à la diffusion en langues étrangères le principe d'impartialité et de la distance de l'influence directe du gouvernement s'est d'emblée posée dans les négociations en 1937 entre la BBC et le *Foreign Office* qui ont conduit à la création du service arabe. La BBC devait s'acquitter de la « projection britannique » de manière responsable, c'est-à-dire omettre des informations susceptibles d'embarrasser le gouvernement. Cet article montre que cet accord non écrit a prévalu au cours des six décennies suivantes. L'analyse des émissions en langue arabe pendant 3 moments de crise dans l'histoire de la politique étrangère britannique au Moyen-Orient vient en appui à cette recherche. Le premier concerne le bulletin d'information controversé du 4 janvier 1938, le tout premier diffusé en langue étrangère. Les deux autres concernent la crise de Suez, et la première guerre du Golfe. Cet article propose ainsi d'explorer la notion de *soft power* telle qu'elle a été développée à la BBC par des journalistes de la diaspora arabe dans des circonstances où les enjeux étaient importants pour la Grande-Bretagne. L'objectif est de scruter à la fois les ambiguïtés et le degré de résilience de la vision Reithienne d'une diplomatie culturelle opérant à travers un modèle de radiodiffusion que John Reith avait lui-même conçu pour une région si sensible et si complexe pour la diplomatie formelle de la Grande-Bretagne.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** BBC Arabic, censorship, public diplomacy, international broadcasting, Middle East, Reithian model

**Mots-clés:** service arabe de la BBC, soft power, Moyen Orient, censure, radiodiffusion internationale, modèle Reithien

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