

# The British Broadcasting Company

## Half a Century of Covering Bahrain

*Nancy Jamal*

Until 1968, Bahrain was a protectorate of the British government during its days of imperial glory, and home to its political agent in the region.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that the first TV programme covering events in Bahrain dates back to the 1950's<sup>2</sup> making, the British Broadcasting Company 'BBC,' the very first international television station that presented news of Bahrain to the world. This work focuses on what vocabulary was being used by the BBC then, and how it developed over time to the narrative we find today. Terminologies being used just under a decade ago have been carried on to this day and have in some cases expanded. The aim of this work is to study how the BBC has set the stage for stereotyping the country in the international media in order to create a strategy, of joint effort, that would overcome this challenge going forward.

### Introduction

On 25 June 2012, the BBC Trust published a lengthy study on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the Arab Spring.<sup>3</sup> Nine pages of the report discussed the reportage of the events in Bahrain that took place between 14 February 2011 until the date of publication.

In this context, Ben Dowell of the Guardian wrote that

The report looked at all BBC TV, radio and online coverage with the exception of World Service radio. Content analysis was undertaken by Loughborough University, covering 44 days of BBC output between December 2010 and January 2012, including



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16 days across a range of broadcasters between November 2011 and January 2012. Qualitative audience research was conducted by Jigsaw Research in January 2012, with 10 focus groups across the UK.<sup>4</sup>

And, in the study's closing remarks, Edward Mortimer, asserted that *The BBC* Considerable efforts were made to warn the public of the unverifiable nature of much of this material, but probably this needs to be done even more rigorously and systematically in the future. The fact that UGC generally enables the public to see conflict through the eyes of opposition activists, rather than governments, seems an inescapable fact of life (p. 83).

Just over a year later, on 23 October 2013, Bahrain's Interior Ministry issued a statement in reference to an earlier BBC television report, announcing that

the report broadcasted yesterday by the BBC Arabic TV station on clashes between police and rioters in Sitra following the funeral of Hussain Mahdi, who was murdered last week, contained a lot of inaccuracies and is a breach of the professional principles of the BBC and the UK standards of television broadcasting.<sup>5</sup>

The Ministry went on to

demand that the BBC Arabic correct the report and to undertake not to broadcast a similar inflammatory material in the future without confirmation, as it incites the commission of crimes and leads to disorder.

This statement came as no surprise to observers of the Bahrain government's international outreach and media policy as it has, since the 1990's, publicly criticised the BBC for engaging in a media war by crafting agendas that promote dissent.

Historically speaking, the UK has paid particular attention to the Arabian region since 1798 when it signed the first documented Treaty in the region with the (then) Sultan of Muscat. For its part, the BBC's coverage of key events in the region and its partisan views, likely reflect Great Britain's former interests and sphere of influence which has included Bahrain since 1967, when Britain's regional naval base was moved from Aden to Bahrain.<sup>6</sup>

To put this into proper context, this study has been conducted to shed light on the entire coverage of BBC with regards to Bahrain, from

its very beginnings and to analyse how it developed over time and what impact it has produced on Bahrain's global image. In short, the main aim of this work is to study how the BBC has set the stage for stereotyping Bahrain in the international media.

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It is intended to help state communicators within governments across the Arab world understand the philosophy and mission of the BBC in its official mission 'to enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain' through the core value of 'trust' as 'the foundation of the BBC' that is 'independent, impartial and honest.'

### **Assessing Key Themes, Moments and Personalities of BBC Coverage of Bahrain**

The BBC's relationship to Bahrain is checkered since there has been a great reliance on the broadcasting company to get images of Bahrain into wider audiences – no simple feat for small countries – and, therefore, great expectations that the images would be impartial and informative. However, this has not always been the case and this section traces the BBC-Bahrain relationship from its earliest, until recent times, by presenting some of the main themes and personalities that have dominated the airwaves – and later print and e-formatted materials – between Bahrain and the UK and, subsequently, Bahrain and the wider international community.

#### *Key Storylines*

The earliest publically available BBC record of Bahrain goes as far back as 1956, as part of a Panorama Report by Woodrow Wyatt. It covered a riot against the (then) British Foreign Minister, Lloyd Selwyn, and the UK's increased commitment to local security.<sup>7</sup> While the riot scenes were certainly important, it was Wyatt's interview of Abdulaziz Al-shamlan – a popular member of the self-described 'non-violent,' National Union Committee – which deserves greater scrutiny. This is because the language that was deployed intended to illustrate a growing frustration between the citizens of Bahrain and its monarchy. In fact, Wyatt excuses the violence and targets Sir Charles Belgrave – a British citizen, advisor and Chief Administrator to the rulers of Bahrain

from 1926 until 1957 – as a source of national (Bahraini) instability. It is legitimate to ask, why a BBC reporter took sides in what was clearly a domestic issue that revolved around the distribution of influence? He lambasted Belgrave, and began to discuss issues of sect. Most importantly, Wyatt's message was that violence and riots are okay if they challenge political order. This is perhaps why Wyatt was keen to highlight the state of Bahrain's local security forces and indicated that 'Bahrainis don't like to be policemen,' because, for Wyatt, that meant serving the ruling authorities, which would indicate a gap between the monarchy and the people of Bahrain. This theme has been revisited many times by the BBC since.

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The 1950's and 1960's were a period of immense change to global politics and the Gulf region was, by no means, insulated. In fact, as the UK began to redeploy its military and political personnel out of the region (1968), there was an initial hope that its departure would herald a new era of regional cooperation, stability and security. These hopes were dashed as Iran's Shah moved against Emirati islands (Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb) and as the Baathist party consolidated power in Iraq. In Western Arabia, the 6 Day War had humbled Egypt and empowered Israel – the BBC had its hands full attempting to cover the wide assortment of events that were unfolding throughout the Middle East. As a result, Bahrain received very little attention in the gap-decade between Wyatt's and John Morgan's own Panorama Report on the UK government's military spending (1964/1965).<sup>8</sup>

Once Bahrain was back on the BBC's radar however, it was clear that little had changed in the thinking of BBC management and the Morgan report included a comprehensive interview with popular opposition leader, Mahmoud Al-Mahdi, regarding the alleged lack of press freedom within the (then) British protectorate. In other words Morgan's reportage actively worked against both Bahrain's government and its British protectors and allies. Certainly it is reasonable for the BBC to present critical views and inspire debate over issues that are important for the British electorate. However, the BBC's role is one of reporter not view-shaper and it is not up to the BBC to try and project UK domestic preferences on Bahrain. So, when Morgan focused on Al-Mahdi and did not seek a second opinion or to verify and double verify Al-Mahdi's claims, he did more than report – he became partial to the situation. Of course, Morgan is not alone and Bahrain is not the only place where

such media distortions occur. However, since Bahrain is geographically a small country, it is more sensitive (than larger states) to the manner in which it is presented internationally and tends to pay closer scrutiny to interference since often small misrepresentations can widely distort the country's image, in addition to fanning the flames of internal tensions. So, when Morgan's report turned to the 1965 bout of unrest and the imprisonment of a teenage protestor – which in larger countries would scarcely be paid attention to – and the tone of the report leads the audience to assume that an insurmountable rift exists between Bahrain's people and its government and that this is best reflected in the Al Khalifa relationship to the UK.

Morgan suggested that the UK should promote democracy within its protectorates, as otherwise it would be associated with unpopular regimes. In other words, Morgan (wrongly) assumed that Bahrainis did not associate themselves with their government. In hindsight, this is a form of manipulating sentiment since there was no reliable data to confirm (or not) an intrinsic tension between the government and citizens in Bahrain in the 1960's. Morgan was insinuating for the sake of promoting a particular idea despite that idea being unsupported by facts.

Wyatt and Morgan shared common views of sympathising with (sometimes violent) demonstrators, abhorrence for the UK's relationship to Bahrain and an assumed gulf in terms of a political class and non-political class. Whilst the realities of Bahrain are significantly more nuanced, these themes formed the bedrock of BBC opinions of Bahrain ever since. This work now moves forward, to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, in order to show how this early tone-setting continues until this day.

Consider that the BBC does not cover Bahrain politically again until 1996 – a (roughly) 30 year period – when Sue Lloyd-Roberts deployed hidden cameras to film a documentary that very bluntly sympathises with protestors. In similar vein to Wyatt and Morgan, Lloyd-Roberts production works around a narrative that lauds the opposition, even if (and when) it uses violence. Such reportage often includes the image of an opposition that is “forced” into violence. At the same time, there is the indication that the opposition must “struggle” against a security apparatus that uses excessive force and is brutal.<sup>9</sup> Lloyd-Roberts' report was neither neutral nor investigative. It was a poor attempt

to debase Bahrain's government by blindly siding with demonstrators even those of dubious record in regards to their relationship to Iran and other members of the Shia theological elites in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon. For instance, in the context of reporting on anti-government violence, Lloyd-Roberts interviews Sheikh Abdulmir Al Jamri, one of the more influential Shia theologians (Najaf school) in Bahrain. Whilst this was indeed an important interview, the opinions reflected on by Al Jamri presented only one narrative and was not followed-up with successive explorations of alternative narratives, even from other opposition groups. Instead, Lloyd-Roberts assumes Al Jamri's testimony to be 100% accurate and takes, at face value, the allegations of torture and abuse in prison.

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Yet, Lloyd-Roberts does add to the long-narrative adopted by the BBC; she is the first to introduce the concept that Bahrain is an island that contains a Shia majority and Sunni minority. Whilst this aspect of the narrative has never been adequately verified – since religious sect is not a question on the country's many censuses – it has, nonetheless, become an instrumental part of opposition discourses. In other words, Lloyd-Roberts' work, despite being under-researched, initiated the 'Shia majority' strand of the narrative, which continues to be used to justify political violence until this day (2014). Such demographic book-keeping will be returned to below.

Finally, Lloyd-Roberts introduced the Iranian dimension to Bahraini decision-making and she points out that Manama fears the influence of the Islamic republic. However, just as it seems that Lloyd-Roberts is trying to rebalance her investigation, she takes heed of Saudi Arabia's role to assist its Bahraini ally quell protests. In doing so, Lloyd-Roberts asserts that Saudi Arabia works with Bahrain and against Iran—fanning regional tensions that continue to define political life in and around the Gulf.

### **The BBC's Rebalancing Act**

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a decided shift in the rhetoric and personalities deployed by the BBC; it certainly attempted to be more neutral in its coverage of live events and in the type and style of the commentaries prepared for Bahrain. So, even though the main focus of BBC reports and journalists remain the opposition and protest

groups, the BBC does draw its information from many more sources including governmental opinions, public views, expatriate communities and a wide assortment of opposition groups ranging from socialists to Sunni and Shia religious groups.<sup>10</sup>

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At this time, most coverage is short and precise and sought to explain political events, criminal arrests and court sentences with the limited use of adjectives that yield sympathy or promote a cause. In other words, in the 1996-1997 period, the BBC attempted to fulfil its institutional ethos and report the news and events from a non-partisan perspective. As a result (and rather surprisingly) in November 1998, the BBC used the word 'terrorists' to describe those engaging in political violence.<sup>11</sup> So, instead of characterising armed groups for the rhetoric they deployed – as Wyatt, Morgan and Lloyd-Roberts had – the BBC began presenting the tactics deployed. This reflects the global transition to a world more aware of the dangers of international terrorism (even before the 11 September attacks) and the BBC had to remain consistent. If the pre-Good Friday Agreement Irish Republican Army (IRA) was depicted as a terrorist group, certainly other groups around the world that deployed such tactics were also terrorists, irrespective of the ideology they stood for.

For Bahrain, the BBC's shift from narrative shaping to reportage meant increased attention for the country's unique security situation both internally and regionally. For instance, in the previous period of narrative shaping, the BBC often quoted unidentified organisations that made claims against the Kingdom regarding Human Rights (etc). Instead of specifying which groups had said what, it was common for the BBC simply to suggest that 'international human rights groups' claimed this or that. However, for the first time, in a 1999 documentary, the BBC specifically attributed a rights abuse allegation to Amnesty International.<sup>12</sup> This small change in the BBC's behaviour significantly changed the playing-field; now the government was able to react directly and pointedly, to make counterclaims and to invite members of the claimant organisations to see the situation for themselves. In other words, the BBC – in those years – assisted in making Human Rights organisations more accountable for their statements and allegations against Bahrain. It is also noteworthy that the BBC, in the same documentary, fairly covered the public accusations of Iranian interference in local Bahraini politics.

### *Bahrain's New King*

With the ascension of the new monarch to the throne in March 1999, His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, declared the nations' rebirth through political, social and economic reform. With this declaration, the BBC's coverage nearly always portrays Bahrain, and its government positively and as a model of regional development.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that the BBC ignored some less high-profile issues; it covered a wide assortment ranging from the impact of reform to exiles abroad. However, it is important to note that the tone of the BBC's reports was less aggressive and more constructive. Whilst the BBC did not desist from interfering in Bahrain, at this time the type and level of interference was actually positive and reinforced the state and its civil society. Consider, for instance, a March 1999 documentary that highlighted Bahraini political activists located in the UK vocally asking their local supporters (in Bahrain) to respect the death of the late Amir and refrain from violent behaviour. The same report uses the words 'Shiite militants' for the first and only time in the BBC's long history of reporting on Bahrain.<sup>14</sup>

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For a number of years, the BBC's reportage on Bahrain was based on promoting King Hamad's reform project and Bahrain observer, Paul Woods, in his September 2002 report, describes it as a 'bold experiment'.<sup>15</sup> The indication was that Bahrain's reforms were unique in the region – a region plagued by conservative systems – in that they were an honest attempt to change the internal dynamics of Bahrain and produce a workable civil society in which each citizen and resident would be an actual shareholder.

Despite such coverage, there were some persistent themes of older times that continued to be proliferated by another group of BBC journalists. It was as though a parallel reportage system had developed in the BBC in regards to Bahrain. One of the clearest examples of this is seen in the demographic (mis)management of BBC explorations of Bahrain.

### *The BBC and Demographic Accounting in Bahrain*

As mentioned above, Lloyd-Roberts was the journalist to first introduce the theme of 'Shia majority' in Bahrain. Since then, the BBC, as an institution, has swayed back and forth in how it portrays the de-



demographic makeup of the country. Whilst this should not have been so important considering that Shia-Sunni relations are overwhelmingly good (only a small number of each sect have developed a more aggressive approach to one another), it has risen to prominence as some minority groups of Shia began to use the demographic argument to legitimise their anti-government violence. It is both interesting and important to provide a brief overview of how the BBC has reported on the demographic makeup of Bahrain over the past decade; that is, since demography became a national issue.

After reviewing BBC reports, it became clear that the media outlet is deeply confused about Bahrain's demography. Indeed, if one were to believe the reportage coming from the BBC, then Bahrain has among the most unstable demographic situations in world history with huge numbers of Shia coming and going day-by-day and year on year. In reality however, the BBC's numbers simply do not add up. There have been no significant changes to Bahrain's demography (in terms of Bahraini Arabs) since 2003. Yet, five different demographic accounting terms have been deployed by the BBC since then.

First, in October 2003, a BBC report mentions that the Shia population to be a 'slight majority'<sup>16</sup> in Bahrain. Whether 'slight' means 50.1%, 51% or 55%, is unclear. However, that there were no numbers included in the report does indicate that the precise demographic balance was (and is) largely guesswork, which is fine since sect has never really been an important identity generator in Bahrain. And yet (second), a mere two years later (2005), the 'slight' majority leaps to the now famous, 70:30 split where Mounira Chaib of the BBC Arabic Service, in February 2005, introduced the 70% ratio of Shias to Sunnis on international television.<sup>17</sup> This has become the standard international accounting standard of the sectarian split and has constantly undermined Bahrain's regional and international standing. In short, Chaib's unresearched and unsubstantiated claims has changed Bahrain's international and internal political situation. Third, only three years later in 2008, and the Shia majority is down 5% and holding steady at 65%, according to Bill Law. Again, there is no way to know how this number was derived at, but for a while – until 2010 – it stuck.<sup>18</sup> That is until the Shia population numbers again shot-up to 70%, at least according to the BBC which defended its demographic accounting tooth and nail throughout the 2011 crises.<sup>19</sup> That is until April 2013 when it drops to 60%.<sup>20</sup>

There is no way to determine accurate numbers amongst Bahrain's sects just like there is no way to fully gauge the impact the BBC's loose accounting produced in terms of local, regional and international fallout. However, it seems that the BBC is sectarian obsessed and has done more than even the staunchest anti-establishment organ in Bahrain to polarise Bahrain's society according to sect. Consider that on the BBC's official website the overview of Bahrain – comprised of an entire 624 words profiling the entire nation and its long history – the word 'Shia' is mentioned 5 times in independent contexts.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the word 'Shia' is disproportionately represented and deployed, mostly, to show intra-Bahraini tensions. With the sole exception of the BBC's note that there are Shia parliamentarians in Bahrain, the other four instances attach terms like, 'tensions,' 'discrimination,' 'resentment,' and 'majority' to the Shia; as though the entire history of Bahrain were reducible to such binary discourse.

## What is in a Word?

### Understanding the BBC's Terminology vis-à-vis Bahrain

But what is in a word? How important are they for understanding the mood of a people or nation? This work regards words as singly the most important expression of national consciousness and identity and hence, when words are used to erroneously depict a political community the likely outcome will shift from words to deeds. Words then are the engines driving actions.

To make this point clearer, this work has created a timeline to better understand the development of terminology within the BBC's coverage of Bahrain since the 1950's and how specific content is repeated, or changed, regardless of source.

What is interesting about the table below is that the words are not only recurring but also build-up over time and become accepted as common concepts that are adopted by others and perhaps used to stereotype different interest groups. It is this very point that makes authorities, such as the Bahrain government, suspicious of foreign news agents. It is therefore essential to understand the manner in which the BBC depicts Bahrain through keywords.

It is clear that many of these terms are exaggerations and feed into the very issues being covered by the BBC. Understanding the words chosen by the BBC to provide its listeners, watchers and readers infor-

mation about Bahrain is vital for understanding the opposition narratives which tend to use these terms in support of their own political goals, which are not a reflection of UK values but have learned to speak the language of the BBC for other, less inclusive ambitions. The recent events collectively called the Arab Spring have revealed this word-game problem very clearly.

## The Arab Spring and After

Bahrain in 2011, after a surge of revolutions in North Africa and the overtaking of the iconic Pearl shaped roundabout and the severing of the heart of the island from the main road connections leading to all strategic areas of the country; changed the once safe haven forever.<sup>22</sup> No Bahraini who experienced the past three years of unrest, will give the same account, or the same analysis.

Until this day, international channels send their correspondents or hire local stringers, to cover the repercussions of whatever took place in 2011. Many of those correspondents have developed, or had pre-existing, ties with Bahraini's from all walks of life, making it only natural for them to adopt the stance of their relations.

Many BBC correspondents have covered Bahrain and its internal affairs with regards to local politics and social developments over the past few years.<sup>23</sup> The names that are readily available are Frank Gardener and Bill Law with others such as Caroline Hawley, Ian Pannell, Jonathan Marcus, Bridget Kendall, Justin Webb, Steven Sackur, Carrie Gracie, Simon Atkinson, John Silverman, Julia Wheeler, Phillip Hampsheir, Paul Woods and Adam Curtis, all of who appear to have covered stories in countries that were undergoing revolutions of the so called 'Arab Spring' prior to the events that occurred in Bahrain.<sup>24</sup>

It has been implied that Frank Gardener is, perhaps seen by those aligned with the government as, the most accurate of the BBC's correspondents assigned to the region and known within local political circles for balanced reportage.<sup>25</sup> The BBC Trust's report on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the Arab Spring quotes an interview with Frank Gardener:

The BBC was accused from many quarters of mis-telling the story. I went down twice last year – in April and November – and heard a lot of complaints from expat Brits, Sunnis, and expat Asians, that BBC coverage was utterly one-sided in the

early months. That's taking it too far, but ... because Bahrain is not a hub centre – it doesn't have a resident bureau with proper analysts or resident journalists – when something takes off if it's big enough you parachute in 'firemen.' So in February we sent in people straight from Tahrir Square or Tunis, and they applied a one-size-fits-all matrix 'protesters good, government bad.'<sup>26</sup>

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On the other hand, there is Bill Law, who is often frowned upon by Bahrain's authorities, and suspected of promoting the opposition's views alone, as he clearly reveals in his reports.<sup>27</sup> One might say that his British sarcasm, when mentioning the government, is lost on those who resent his work. Yet when investigating his reportage of Bahrain, all the way back to 2008, in at least 11 independent pieces, only the more 'radical' element of Bahrain's opposition is portrayed. In fairness, it is necessary to point out that on 15 March 2011, he was the first to mention the savage killing of a policeman and the difficult job of the security personnel during those hard times.<sup>28</sup>

Such discrepancies in reporting, however, are irresponsible and send mixed messages to the wider international public. Since the BBC is meant to report on unfolding global situations, it is difficult to understand how there is so much room to interpret events. In Bahrain, this has had such acute repercussions that it is fair to suggest that the BBC is interfering in the domestic political affairs of the country. For the most part, in the BBC's coverage of Bahrain, since 2011, the government is depicted somewhat monstrously whilst the opposition is treated as a victim and the rest of Bahrain's society, seemingly, doesn't exist at all. So, when on 19 February 2011, the BBC TODAY programme presented an audio of Justin Webb with David Mellor who highlighted Shiite extremism and mentions a history of association with Iran to the extent of military training for affiliated Bahrain based extremists,<sup>29</sup> it is clear that there is more to the story. However, the BBC has gotten used to slicing away the national metanarrative in favour of sub-narratives that divide the nation and infuse the next generation of violence.

## Conclusion

It is only through research, analysis and reaching a common understanding that the science of communications has developed. The marriage between media rhetoric and public opinion is a fascinating dis-

cipline that needs much more study, given the ever-changing, forever expanding world of media. Because of this, many divergent parties will claim to know better when it comes to the coverage of news. Whilst the media rushes to report the correct, and in some cases 'juicer' story, governments worry about the impact of their international image on local affairs and vice versa.

The BBC, being a well-entrenched media conglomerate, falls to the whim of different interest groups and stakeholders. Such is the case for any organisation within the same industry. It has displayed self-discipline on many occasions and has acted with courage and goodwill by publishing a report on the standard of its operations.<sup>30</sup>

No doubt, it is up to the powers that be to impose integrity and encourage precision. Yet in the end, it is the people in the field, journalists, political activists, human-rights defenders, story-tellers, on-line sources and even official communicators to demonstrate good judgment, benevolence, honesty and candour.



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She was previously Director of External Relations & Global Outreach at the Bahrain Center for Strategic, International & Energy Studies where she reported to the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, & Diplomatic Affairs Advisor to HM the King. She also acted as a Communications Advisor to various government organizations in addition to being a member of the National Committee delegated to the World Petroleum Council.

Prior to that she was Chief of Press and Foreign Media where she played a vital role in setting the country's international communications strategy & was in charge of establishing and operating information offices in Washington D.C., London, Paris and Cairo. During this period she served within the Cabinets' of the the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Information.

Ms Jamal is a former investment banker with broad knowledge of the principles of contemporary Islamic banking and combating money laundering. She has also held the positions of Executive Committee

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*Disclosure Statement: The information and opinions in this document are the sole responsibility of the author and in no way reflect the views of the employer nor any other party of interest.*

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