

# **A BBC Trust report on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the "Arab Spring"**

June 2012

# Contents

<b>BBC Trust conclusions</b>	<b>1</b>
Summary	1
Context	2
Findings by Edward Mortimer	3
The BBC Executive's response to Edward Mortimer's report	5
BBC Trust conclusions	6
<b>BBC Executive response to Edward Mortimer's report</b>	<b>8</b>
The nature of the review	8
Strategy	9
Coverage issues	11
<b>Independent assessment for the BBC Trust by Edward Mortimer - May 2012</b>	<b>12</b>
Executive summary	12
Introduction	15
1. Framing of the conflict/conflicts	20
2. Egypt	23
3. Libya	28
4. Bahrain	36
5. Syria	45
6. Elsewhere, perhaps?	54
7. Matters arising	69
Summary of Findings	84

# BBC Trust conclusions

## Summary

The Trust decided in June 2011 to launch a review into the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the "Arab Spring".

In choosing to focus on the events known as the "Arab Spring" the Trust had no reason to believe that the BBC was performing below expectations. The Trust chose this subject because of its importance and because of the complexity of deciding how to organise impartial coverage in a fast-moving story across a range of conflicting voices eager to command world attention. That propaganda and fact were sometimes hard to distinguish, and that the significance of what was occurring was not always easy to identify and convey were also factors in the choice of this subject. The formal terms of reference for the review can be found here:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press\\_releases/2011/arabspring\\_impartiality.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2011/arabspring_impartiality.html)

The Trust commissioned Edward Mortimer, then Senior Vice President of the Salzburg Global Seminar, former UN Director of Communications and expert in Middle East affairs, to lead the review. His review has been assessed by the Trust, together with the research which was specially commissioned to accompany it. It has produced a number of significant findings which the Trust believes are valuable in considering coverage going forward.

In summary, the Trust's conclusions are that:

- The BBC's coverage of the Arab Spring was remarkable given the challenges involved and was generally impartial
- The Trust recognises the considerable courage of the journalists and technicians on the ground who reported on these events, some of whom risked their lives to bring stories to air.
- The BBC's coverage of this series of events was generally impartial. There were, however, points where coverage could have been fuller in various geographical areas at different times. Some countries had little coverage, others could have been followed up more fully and there could have been fuller examination of the different voices which made up the opposition to various incumbent governments. In addition a broader range of international reaction could have been covered.
- This review has been helped by clear, open communication with the Executive, with management and journalists examining their past decisions self-critically and with the benefit of hindsight and sharing their views with Edward Mortimer.
- The Trust expects that the well evidenced points made by Edward Mortimer on the coverage of individual countries and areas will be considered by the News Division and will shape future coverage in this and other parts of the world.
- The Trust welcomes the Executive's proposal to include a stand back item at the News Editorial Board and the intention to look at the strategic guidance the Middle East Editor can offer. The question as to how much coverage BBC One bulletins (with their unique audience reach) should provide to give context and cover stories which are not necessarily high profile is one which the News Editorial Board will wish to explore.

- The Trust welcomes the Executive's recognition that the BBC could have made better use of references to the website within broadcast items for those interested in more information or background, and encourages its use in particular on those outlets which attract younger audiences.
- In order to safeguard audiences' trust, the BBC should consider how it might better share more effectively with the audience the rigorous vetting process to which all User Generated Content (UGC) is subjected.
- The Trust will welcome an update from the Director of BBC News in the autumn of 2012.

## Context

The BBC Agreement<sup>1</sup> requires the BBC to give information about and increase understanding of the world through accurate and impartial news, other information and analysis of current events and ideas. The BBC has set itself the challenge of providing the best journalism in the world. One of the ways the BBC tests whether its journalism lives up to this high ideal is by reviews, commissioned by the BBC Trust, of the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's output. As such, the Trust has pursued a series of impartiality reviews: this is the fourth that the Trust has carried out since it was established in 2007. Previous reviews have examined coverage of business, the devolved nations and science. These reviews centre on an independent assessment of content from an expert lead author, drawing on specially commissioned research, and provided to the Trust in order to help form its own conclusions.

The Trust has carried out this review in order to examine the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the "Arab Spring". The review examined coverage on BBC national TV and radio, online content, and BBC World News (the BBC's commercial international news service) beginning with events in Tunisia in December 2010 and, following on from that, most notably in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen.

As well as the authored report by Edward Mortimer, the review also included content analysis and audience research. The content analysis was undertaken by Loughborough University and can be found here:

([http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/editorial\\_standards/impartiality/arab\\_spring.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/arab_spring.html)). It covered 44 days of output between December 2010 and January 2012, including an analysis of 16 days across a range of broadcasters (Nov-Jan 2011/12). The qualitative audience research was carried out by Jigsaw Research and can be found here:

([http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/editorial\\_standards/impartiality/arab\\_spring.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/arab_spring.html)). It took place across the UK in January 2012 and incorporated ten focus groups who were asked about how impartiality and accuracy are judged by the audience, what factors affect their views on coverage and whether the BBC's coverage was perceived to be accessible, accurate and partial or impartial.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/governance/regulatory\\_framework/charter\\_agreement.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/governance/regulatory_framework/charter_agreement.html)

## Findings by Edward Mortimer

In his report, Edward Mortimer noted that the BBC's Editorial Guidelines require it "to provide a broad range of subject matter and perspectives over an appropriate timeframe across our output as a whole", and assessed impartiality on this basis, as well as the diversity of opinion included and the professional detachment of BBC reporting. Besides listening to, viewing and reading BBC output he interviewed over 40 BBC journalists and executives as well as a number of experts.

Edward Mortimer was impressed by the range of much of the coverage. He was positive about the coverage of the 18 days of protest leading to the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt; the maintenance of a presence on both sides in Libya; and the coverage of Tunisia. He noted the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not side-lined.

However, despite positive comments on the coverage of all the following countries he also expressed concern about the drop in coverage of Egypt after President Mubarak's fall; the delay in covering human rights abuses by rebel forces in Libya; the lack of context in early coverage of Bahrain and later sporadic coverage of the country; lack of context in the television coverage of Syria such as the composition of the opposition and the impact of events on regional stability and minorities; and a fall-off in coverage of Yemen, Algeria, Morocco and Jordan. In particular he was concerned about the small amount of coverage of Saudi Arabia. Whilst recognising the way the BBC spreads different aspects of coverage across its various outlets and the difficulty of covering all the various news stories that emerged at this time he considered some television bulletins lacked context.

Edward Mortimer also was concerned that the content analysis had picked up minimal coverage of reactions to the "Arab Spring" in countries outside the region, other than Britain, the US and France – including major powers like Russia and China as well as emerging ones such as Brazil, India and South Africa. He also noted that the content analysis showed fewer than might be expected cross references to BBC online and a lack of reference to the authentication of User Generated Content (UGC) such as mobile phone footage. He noted that there does not appear to be any clear or consistent policy about the use of the word "regime" to describe the governments of foreign countries.

While recognising the great importance of plurality, with due autonomy for individual departmental and programme editors, Edward Mortimer wondered whether true plurality may not (paradoxically perhaps) require stronger direction from the top, if only to ensure that too many resources are not concentrated in one place while other important stories, or aspects of stories, are overlooked or skimped.

## Research findings

The content analysis identified three phases of coverage: in phase 1 (December 2010 – January 2011), the importance of what was about to unfold was not fully appreciated and reported on. By phase 2, wave 1 (January – May 2011), the significance of the mass protests was apparent and reports conveyed a feeling of exhilaration from the ground as previously stable regimes seemed about to fall. By phase 2, wave 2 (July – October 2011), there was a second peak of coverage. In phase 3, from November 2011 to January 2012, there was recognition of the ambiguity of events as the character of the revolutions came under scrutiny. The content analysis found that only a small minority of reports used UGC and this was mainly mobile phone footage. It was not clear who the authors were and there were no caveats about authenticity or representativeness in 74% (131 items) of the sample. [The BBC has a unit which specialise in authenticating such material before it is used and it is possible that authentication occurred but was not mentioned.] The analysis also found that the BBC news website provides a significant amount of background material, yet no cross reference was made to BBC online in over 97% of BBC news items. (Although with several items per programme it is likely that only one cross reference would be made in any event per programme.)

The qualitative audience research revealed that accuracy and impartiality are amongst respondents' top priorities. In particular, impartiality was felt to rely on balance in terms of perspectives shown and neutrality in terms of tone and language. Audiences wanted coverage that was engaging, easy to follow, informative and up to date. But none of these were expected to come at the cost of accuracy or impartiality. The research also found that some aspects of events were less well understood than others, including the wider context and background, less iconic events and lower profile uprisings and the outlook for the future.

## The BBC Executive's response to Edward Mortimer's report

The Executive indicated their gratitude for the clarity of the review and the broad support it offered for the BBC's coverage of the "Arab Spring". The Executive agreed that there were areas where they could have improved coverage but raised some reservations about some aspects of the review.

Regarding the nature of the review, the Executive emphasised that the guideline that the BBC should "seek to provide a broad range of subject matter and perspectives over an appropriate timeframe across our output as a whole", covers the BBC's output as a whole not simply an individual programme or programmes and that there has to be an appropriate balance between the coverage on any given subject and the resources or space which needed to commit to other, major, stories.

On the decision-making structure at BBC News, the Executive highlighted that the complexity, scale and reach of BBC News means that it cannot be run like a newspaper with a single controlling editor and that many editorial decisions will inevitably be devolved. The Executive outlined how their editorial strategy is determined at the News Editorial Board, under the leadership of the Director of News Group. The Executive also highlighted that, although daily news meetings in the morning and afternoon review editorial decisions in the light of events and set the direction for the day, editorial decisions made on a daily basis can add up to a significant pattern over time, despite the plurality of the BBC's output and different audiences.

As a result of the review, the Executive propose that a specific "stand back" item at the News Editorial Board might help to provide greater direction of big, unfolding, events. This would also help to consider further what has and has not been covered and how the BBC might remedy any omissions which might affect perceptions of impartiality.

The Executive recognise that to do fewer things with greater efficiency, it will inevitably require greater direction from the centre to deliver the BBC's editorial objectives. However, this must not undermine the basic principle which lies at the heart of BBC News' accountability – that editors edit.

The Executive will also review the Middle East Editor's work and the emphasis placed on his strategic guidance in the light of the author's comments.

The Executive acknowledged that in some early instances in the BBC's Bahrain coverage, more thought could have been given as to how the BBC could have kept audiences across the complexity of events. Also, in retrospect some gaps in other areas of reporting, such as the Egyptian elections, should have been identified and remedied by the News Editorial Board earlier than they were. The Executive also acknowledged that in some cases the BBC did not do enough to draw attention to content on BBC News Online which might enable audiences to deepen their understanding of an event.

Finally, when considering the use of language, the Executive recognised the difficulty around the use of the word "regime" and that, although there is no consensus on what constitutes a "regime", its usage may imply a value judgement and make it hard to define when it is appropriate to use. The Executive therefore intend to develop a policy to achieve consistency across all services without undermining objectivity and accuracy.

## BBC Trust conclusions

The Trust would like to thank Edward Mortimer for his report and would also like to thank Loughborough University and Jigsaw Research for their supporting work. They provide an excellent overview of this period of reporting on some of the BBC's principle services. Edward Mortimer's report recognises both the excellence of the BBC's reporting and identifies with evidence where coverage could have been done differently and makes challenging points on the strategic oversight of such major stories which the BBC will respond to.

This review has been helped by clear, open communication with the Executive, examining their past decisions self-critically and with the benefit of hindsight and sharing their views with Edward Mortimer. The Trust recognises that covering events such as those which became known as the "Arab Spring" are testing. They unfolded in a part of the world which is unfamiliar to much of the UK audience and also to many overseas. Covering them meant the deployment of considerable resource by the BBC for sustained periods into difficult and dangerous areas. There were complex organisational judgements to be made by the BBC's news gathering staff in London aided by the input of the Middle East Bureau and the Middle East Editor as the story developed. BBC staff and freelancers contributed to this coverage on the ground sometimes at great personal risk. Individual editors then used the incoming material to try to make sense of events which were very fast moving but were often far more complicated than appeared at first sight.

The Trust recognises the considerable courage of the journalists and technicians on the ground who reported on these events, some of whom risked their lives to bring stories to air. The BBC's coverage of the Arab Spring was remarkable given the challenges involved and was generally impartial.

The Trust notes that opposition voices predominated in stories both in numbers interviewed and in the length of time given to the opposition. It is the Trust's view that as regimes fall it is likely that in achieving due impartiality the BBC will reflect the strength of feeling on the ground and give due weight to it. In considering how to balance the voices of protestors and regimes the Trust considers due impartiality is achieved as long as the voices of the governments under scrutiny are included where appropriate and their position explained in relevant output and BBC journalists maintain a neutral tone. The audience research supports this perspective.

Edward Mortimer has argued that range of subject matter and perspectives over an appropriate timeframe must play a part in deciding how the BBC has delivered impartiality. This is in accord with the BBC's commitment to achieve due impartiality by providing a broad range of subject matters and perspectives over an appropriate time frame over the BBC's output as a whole. The Trust is aware that it has not been possible to study all of the BBC's output; however, the Trust considers the coverage of this series of events was generally impartial. There were, however, points where coverage could have been fuller in various geographical areas at different times. Some countries had little coverage, others could have been followed up more fully and there could have been fuller examination of the different voices which made up the opposition to various incumbent governments.

News judgements are for the Director-General and his staff to make. The Trust expects that the well evidenced points made by Edward Mortimer on the coverage of individual countries and areas will be considered by the News Division and learnings will help shape future coverage in this and other parts of the world. The question as to how much coverage BBC One bulletins (with their unique audience reach) should provide to less high profile stories is particularly challenging. Edward Mortimer argues for more. In a limited

time it is not possible to cover all the stories that the BBC might wish to cover. Even so Edward Mortimer makes significant points about the need to provide more context and cover stories which are not necessarily high profile through current affairs and news on BBC One as a means of helping the audience to more fully understand some elements of the story. The Trust believes the News Board will wish to explore these issues in further detail going forward.

The ambition to do fewer stories bigger and better as part of the BBC's strategy of Delivering Quality First will mean a level of direction from the News Board which will, to some extent, militate against the historic BBC trend of allowing editors to make their own decisions. Keeping a wide range of voices for audiences to ensure impartiality and making sure that gaps do not emerge will be a matter for the Executive but one in which the Trust will expect to be kept sighted. The Trust welcomes the Executive's proposal to include a "stand back" item at the News Editorial Board, and also welcomes the intention to look at the strategic guidance the Middle East Editor can offer. The Trust will welcome an update from the Director of BBC News in the autumn of 2012 of her further conclusions on strategic oversight.

The audience research showed that viewers feel coverage is more accurate if they see journalists on the ground and view footage for themselves. The BBC is well positioned to meet this need but there will be times when the security concerns will be significant and on these occasions the Trust understands that the BBC must operate from outside the country to provide the audience with coverage and ensure the safety of its own staff.

Research also shows that human interest continues to drive audience engagement. There is a balancing act between human interest and detailed context. The balance may not always be quite correct but in the Trust's view the BBC works extremely hard on this and should feel empowered to keep working on this balance in the best interests of audiences.

The Trust has noted with interest the cross referencing of different News sources by engaged members of the audience and in particular that younger audiences are placing reliance on the web. The Trust welcomes the Executive's recognition that the BBC could have made better use of references to the BBC website within broadcast items for those interested in more information or background, and encourages its use in particular on those outlets which attract younger audiences. The Trust also considers that, in order to safeguard audiences' trust, the BBC should consider how it might better share more effectively with the audience the rigorous vetting process to which all User Generated Content (UGC) is subjected. It welcomes the Executive's decision to develop a policy on the use of the word "regime" to aid journalists.

# BBC Executive response to Edward Mortimer's report

We are grateful for Edward Mortimer for the clarity of his review and his broad support for our coverage of the 'Arab Spring.' We were pleased to see that overall he stands 'in awe' of BBC News Group's success in meeting the varied requirements of its wide range of audiences. As the author also states, however, we would expect to be judged by the highest standards. Indeed, some of the report's criticisms are ones we ourselves voiced to the author who notes "an admirable culture of internal questioning and search for improvement." In the same spirit, although we have reservations about some aspects of the review, we agree that there were areas where we could have improved our coverage.

## The nature of the review

### i) Its remit

The author has defined his remit in terms which have allowed him to produce a general editorial examination of our coverage rather than an impartiality review as previously carried out. To do this he has quoted from the BBC guideline which states that we "should seek to provide a broad range of subject matter and perspectives over an appropriate timeframe across our output as a whole."

We would note firstly that this guideline, as it states, covers our output as a whole not simply an individual programme or programmes; secondly, that there has to be an appropriate balance between the coverage it is possible, sensible, or practical to deliver on any given subject and the resources or space which we need to commit to other, major, stories.

### ii) The World in 2011

During the period under review, events in the region were at times dramatic, sometimes for prolonged periods. They included the downfall of President Mubarak, the bombing of Libya and Colonel Gaddafi's capture and death. Not surprisingly, therefore, there was, as the author suggests, "an intense focus on certain episodes" of the various uprisings.

It is important to stress, too, the enormity of events elsewhere in the world. The Japanese tsunami was one of the most expensive and difficult deployments we have undertaken in recent memory and of great interest to all our audiences. There was also a crisis in the Eurozone; the killing of Osama bin Laden; the Norway shootings; the Royal wedding; the English riots and the phone hacking scandal.

The author notes some of these events but his concern was not to study their impact on our deployments in the Middle East, nor the pressure they placed upon programme space. Rather it was to examine the standard of our coverage of a dozen separate countries, from Algeria to Yemen, in isolation from the wider editorial considerations that were, in reality, at play.

## Strategy

### i) Decision-making structure

The author nonetheless expresses his concern that "the mechanism for taking strategic decisions about the emphasis of news coverage, with consequent deployment of staff and resources, is somewhat opaque."

BBC News is a complex organisation, which aims to offer a plurality of output, with its programmes and services seeking to attract different audiences with a wide range of voices and content. Its scale and reach mean that BBC News cannot be run like a newspaper with a single controlling editor. With four and a half hours of national and international news output for every hour of the day, many editorial decisions are inevitably devolved, but such decisions are taken within the framework of the BBC's editorial values and objectives.

Our overall editorial strategy is determined at the News Editorial Board, under the leadership of the Director of News Group, which provides our journalists with BBC News's objectives and priorities. The editorial board - which is currently being reformed by the Director to encompass the integration of Global News into the overall News group - sets the strategic direction for BBC News: for example, where to invest in bureaux; which roles should be developed; and which subjects, themes and undercurrents should be given a particular editorial focus.

All editorial heads of department sit on the Board and they share the conclusions of their discussions with editors at departmental meetings, who do the same at output level. Daily news meetings in the morning and afternoon - starting at 0840 with the Director of News Group's meeting for key editorial leaders - review editorial decisions in the light of events and set the direction for the day.

As the author says, however, journalists are constantly required to make sense of highly complex events unfolding at bewildering speed. Editorial decisions made on a daily basis, reacting to a story or competing stories of considerable complexity and unpredictability, can, of course, add up to a significant pattern over time, despite the plurality of the BBC's output and the different audiences we serve. There can be sins of both omission and commission, whatever an organisation's structure or overall objectives, and the author has highlighted some of these.

In broadcasting, unlike in newspapers where there is an easily read archive, it can be especially hard to keep track of analytical provision on a daily basis, not least in a large organisation with so much news output. So, as a result of the review, we would propose that a specific 'stand back' item at editorial board might help to provide greater direction of big, unfolding, events. This would help us to consider further what has and has not been covered and how we might remedy any omissions which might affect perceptions of impartiality. It would also help to co-ordinate our approach to documentaries on major news stories, which the author highlights.

Over the past eight years, there has in fact been increasing co-ordination and sharing of editorial material through the creation of multi-media departments and the abolition of some editorships and independent commissioning budgets. The challenge for us in the future, under Delivering Quality First, will be to do fewer things with greater efficiency, and on a bigger and better scale, without losing the range and diversity on which impartiality depends. "Fewer, bigger, better" will inevitably require greater direction from the centre simply to deliver our editorial objectives with less money. This may have the benefit of ensuring that perceived gaps in coverage, especially on the main television bulletins, are better addressed. This should not, however, be at the risk of constraining

our broad plurality of voice and agenda, nor should it undermine the basic principle which lies at the heart of our accountability - that editors edit.

**ii) Role of Middle East editor**

In 2005 we took the strategic decision to create the post of Middle East editor to try to ensure that the region was reported more consistently and in a more considered fashion. We believe this has significantly improved the BBC's coverage of the 'Arab world.'

When the post was created, we debated whether the role should be as a London-based adviser for editors but concluded that the audience need was for a key figure who drew his authority from the strength of his on the ground reporting and analysis, but who would also advise programmes.

We will review the balance of the editor's work and the emphasis we place on his strategic guidance in the light of the author's comments. We also conclude that there are dangers in releasing key broadcasters, such as the Middle East editor, to work on current affairs documentaries in the middle of a major story. While this undoubtedly enriched the BBC's output of the 'Arab Spring' as a whole, it meant that for a period daily news editors had less contact with his expertise and guidance of the coverage than they would otherwise have had.

## Coverage issues

### i) Making sense of events

The ambition of BBC TV News bulletins is to provide supporting context and explanation when developments are complicated or require background analysis. In practice, bulletins must constantly fight against pressure on space and balance the requirement to cover the significant news of the day with an explanatory function. A television bulletin must not only cover the world but also demonstrate, for example, an in-depth understanding of the important news items from the constituent nations of the UK.

BBC News has always placed great emphasis on eyewitness reporting and it is a vital component in the trust audiences place in us. But it is not the only way to make events clear and to achieve impartiality. We now conclude that in the early stages of our Bahrain coverage we could have given more thought as to how we could have kept audiences across the complexity of events, even where it was impossible to be on the ground for security or logistical reasons.

In retrospect, too, daily news editors should have been more interested in the Egyptian elections at the end of 2010, and the succession to Mubarak after his fall, and more curious about the nature of the Syrian opposition. These gaps should have been identified and remedied by the News Editorial Board earlier than they were.

Discrete analysis on 'short format' news bulletins will always have to compete for space. But as we suggested to the author wherever possible broadcast outlets should flag specific items on BBC News Online that might enable the audience to deepen their understanding of an event. We did not do enough of this, and we fully accept this as a lesson of this review.

### ii) Language

The use of the word "regime" is an immensely difficult subject to resolve because its use can suggest a value judgement. This is a genuine area of debate within BBC News, not least because the BBC World Service and BBC domestic news service serve very different audiences. The former, broadcasting to a variety of countries across the world with different forms of government, tends to avoid the word, while the latter will on occasion use it, on the basis that 'government' cannot adequately describe for a UK audience steeped in democracy the nature of, for example, Syria's system.

In a digital age, however, it is no longer possible to assume an easy split between domestic and overseas audiences. This was the basis on which our guidance on the use of the word 'terrorist' evolved and, as the author notes, the World Service and BBC News are now part of a single news group.

There is no consensus on what constitutes a "regime" although a connotation such as authoritarianism is often held to be attached to the term. We accept, however, that usage today tends to imply a value judgment, and that it is hard to define when it might be appropriate to employ the word. We will examine ways to develop a policy so that we can achieve consistency across all our services without undermining our reputation for objectivity and accuracy.

# Independent assessment for the BBC Trust by Edward Mortimer - May 2012

## Executive summary

### Introduction

Purpose of the review: It was not commissioned in response to any complaint or criticism, but is part of a regular process designed to ensure that BBC news and current affairs programmes maintain the highest standards of impartiality and accuracy. It is the first review of its kind to deal with coverage of events happening mainly abroad. It includes content analysis and audience research, commissioned separately from this assessment.

Meaning of impartiality: I noted that the BBC's Editorial Guidelines require it "to provide a broad range of subject matter and perspectives over an appropriate timeframe across our output as a whole", and undertook the assessment of impartiality on this basis, as well as the diversity of opinion included and the professional detachment of BBC reporting.

Challenges of covering conflict: I am well aware of the difficulties and dangers faced by journalists in covering the "Arab Spring" and have no wish to aggravate any of them. I approached my task with humility, not to say trepidation – particularly as, unlike my predecessors, I was asked to assess BBC World television and the BBC website (though not World Service radio) as well as domestic broadcasting. Besides viewing and listening to many hours of broadcasts, and reading many thousands of words on the website, I interviewed over 40 BBC journalists and executives as well as a number of experts. My overall respect for the BBC's professionalism is very high, and any criticisms in the assessment are intended only to help it do even better.

### Framing the conflicts

I defend the use of the phrase "Arab Spring", and of words such as "revolution" in describing the events of early 2011, while agreeing with hindsight that perhaps more could have been done at that time to include other interpretations. I note that there does not appear to be any clear or consistent policy about the use of the word "regime" to describe the governments of foreign countries.

### Egypt

I was impressed by the range of voices included in coverage of the 18 days of protest leading to the fall of President Mubarak, the only notable omission at that stage being the "Salafists". I did not share the feeling of some of the sample audience that the reporters themselves were unduly "euphoric". I did note, however, that the volume of coverage fell off rather sharply after Mubarak's fall, and that Egypt was somewhat neglected in the months between February and November 2011.

### Libya

For a number of reasons – including the notoriety of Colonel Gaddafi, the dramatic nature of the conflict, and the fact that British forces became involved – Libya received the lion's share of coverage of the "Arab Spring" between February and October 2011. The BBC did well in maintaining a presence on both sides throughout. It gave Gaddafi and his family and officials many opportunities to express their views, and did interrogate the rebel

leaders (as well as British ministers) about their strategy and war aims. It was slow, however, to shine a spotlight on human rights abuses committed by rebel forces, particularly against immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and dark-skinned Libyans.

## Bahrain

In the early stages, some BBC reports failed to explain the specific context of the uprising in Bahrain, where the Shia community had long chafed against rule by a Sunni minority, which in turn feared that the country would fall under Iranian dominance. They did report the severe crackdown on protestors between 14 and 19 February 2011, and again on 14-18 March, but almost completely ignored the period in between when the security forces were more restrained and the Crown Prince sought an agreement with the opposition. This cannot wholly be excused by security concerns and the lack of official accreditation for journalists, although these problems were real. In later months there was some good coverage but rather sporadic, and perhaps insufficient considering Bahrain's strategic significance and close connection with the UK.

## Syria

All international media have been hampered, in covering events in Syria, by the very limited and infrequent access to the country allowed them by the government. The BBC had an advantage in having a very brave correspondent on the spot, Lina Sinjab, but as a Syrian national she was subject to many constraints, and after the early weeks was not able to travel within the country outside Damascus. Most BBC reporting therefore had to be done from outside, although increasingly journalists were sent in clandestinely, culminating in the outstanding reports from Homs by Paul Wood between November 2011 and March 2012. Jeremy Bowen also made very good use of the ten-day visit he was officially allowed in January 2012. Overall, BBC television news lagged behind radio and the website in setting the uprising in context and considering its implications for minorities and for regional stability. There could have been closer investigation of the different strands within the opposition, and its leadership. It is also possible that the BBC overestimated the purely peaceful or nonviolent character of the protest movement in its early stages, but this is hard to verify.

## Other countries

The BBC reached Tunisia ahead of other UK broadcasters, just in time to cover the fall of President Ben Ali, and thereafter did a good job of keeping up with events. It also had some good reporting from Yemen – a difficult and dangerous country to cover – but not the sustained focus one might have hoped for, given the scale and drama of the events and the country's strategic significance. On Algeria, Morocco and Jordan coverage fell away almost completely after the first days – though all three would have merited more scrutiny of the different methods by which their governments have so far managed to contain protests movements that initially looked comparable to those in Tunisia and Egypt. Similarly, and more seriously, coverage of Saudi Arabia has been thin, which difficulty of access cannot fully excuse given the country's enormous strategic importance. Iraq inevitably suffered a relative drop in attention, but coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not "squeezed" or "sidelined" as much as one might have feared. A serious omission, though, was the very thin coverage of reactions to the "Arab Spring" in countries outside the region, other than Britain, the US and France – including major powers like Russia and China and emerging ones such as Brazil, India and South Africa.

## General observations

### Context and background

Although the review does not cover the period before December 2010, some BBC executives volunteered the view that in that period Middle East coverage focused too intensively on the Arab-Israel conflict, at the expense of the wider Arab world, so that the public was more surprised by the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" than it need have been. Once the uprisings started, a good effort was made to explain their causes and context, particularly on the website. References to the website in broadcast programmes could be more frequent and systematic, and more precisely targeted.

### Source material

The great new challenge of the "Arab Spring", as a media phenomenon, has been the explosion of "user-generated content" (UGC), combined with the need to rely on this because direct access to the story is so often denied or impeded. On the whole the BBC handled this well, drawing on its impressive reserves of regional expertise in the Arabic section and the Monitoring service. It also made efforts to alert viewers and listeners when such material could not be definitely authenticated, but this should perhaps be done on a more systematic basis.

### Diversity of output

The BBC certainly made use of its wide variety of output (radio and TV documentaries and current affairs programmes, News Channel, website etc) to cover stories or aspects of stories for which there was not room on the main news bulletins, especially those on TV. It could perhaps have done this more extensively, and more systematically. As for the main TV news bulletins, they stuck – sometimes at the expense of context – to their main task of covering the events of each day as they happened.

### Strategic direction

My main concern, in concluding my assessment, is that the mechanism for taking strategic decisions about the emphasis of news coverage, with consequent deployment of staff and resources, is somewhat opaque. While recognising the great importance of plurality, with due autonomy for individual departmental and programme editors, I wonder whether true plurality may not (paradoxically perhaps) require stronger direction from the top, if only to ensure that too many resources are not concentrated in one place while other important stories, or aspects of stories, are overlooked or skimped.

## Introduction

### Purpose of the review

This is the fourth impartiality review published since the formation of the BBC Trust in January 2007. Previous reviews have looked at the coverage of business (May 2007), of the four UK nations (June 2008) and of science (July 2011). There was also a more general review, "From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel – Safeguarding impartiality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century", published in June 2007.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the topic chosen for this review – "the events known as the 'Arab Spring'" – is very different from any of these earlier ones. Instead of being a generic and more or less permanent group of issues, it refers to a set of events bounded – albeit not very precisely – in place and time. And instead of referring to issues which, for the BBC, arise wholly or mainly within the United Kingdom, it deals with coverage of events abroad.

At first sight, there may seem to be a closer parallel with the review of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, commissioned by the BBC Governors and published in April 2006. But that review was conducted by an independent panel, chaired by a distinguished civil servant, Sir Quentin Thomas. This one, by contrast, is carried out by the Trust itself. I have been asked to contribute this independent assessment, but I do so as an individual, with the assistance of a project director, Caroline Haydon, and project coordinator, Helen Nice. Their assistance has been invaluable, indeed indispensable, but the responsibility for my conclusions is mine alone. The content analysis, carried out by Loughborough University, and the audience research, by Jigsaw Research, were commissioned separately, although I was consulted about their scope and given the opportunity to discuss their findings.<sup>3</sup>

More important, the Thomas review dealt with a very specific conflict in which there are two well identified "sides", even if there are many divisions and disagreements within each of them. The BBC's coverage of that conflict is subject to constant vigilance, and frequent complaints, on the part of people and institutions representing or identifying with one or other of these sides. Almost inevitably, therefore, the Thomas panel was asked to pay particular regard not only to accuracy, fairness and context, but also to "balance and bias".

The Thomas panel did an excellent job, and I have not been asked to revisit its conclusions. The events known as the "Arab Spring" present very different challenges to journalism. They occurred in a wide range of countries and involved many different actors. At certain times and places it may be possible to identify two sides in a conflict, but in many cases alignments have been subject to rapid change as the events developed. Most of those involved have not been represented by well organized lobbies devoted to monitoring and influencing the international media, as is the case with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is therefore not very surprising to find that the BBC and the

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<sup>2</sup> This report was commissioned by the Board of Governors (the body which preceded the Trust) and BBC management to identify the challenges and risks in a "multi-polar Britain" where communications technology was changing rapidly.

<sup>3</sup> The Content Analysis team was asked to focus in depth on BBC coverage of the "Arab Spring" on a relatively small sample of days between December 2010 and January 2012, the majority of which were chosen because of specific events happening in the Middle East at that time. I have tried to test some of the findings by sampling BBC output over the whole period, but could only do so in a much less thorough and comprehensive way.

Trust have received hardly any formal complaints about coverage of these events. What has surprised many people, by contrast, including many within the BBC, is that the Trust should have chosen this topic as the subject of an impartiality review. Many have responded with incomprehension, or with such questions as "Why, is there a problem?"

My first task, therefore, has been to reassure. No, there is not "a problem", if that is taken to mean widespread dissatisfaction with the BBC's coverage; and as far as I can discover no such dissatisfaction was behind the Trust's choice of this topic. It seems there was a more general desire to examine how the BBC covers conflicts, and a feeling that this could be done more manageably if a specific conflict or set of conflicts figuring prominently in the news in 2011 were selected. Therefore I have not embarked on this assessment with anything remotely like a "presumption of guilt", or even any preconceived notion of a "case" that the BBC is required to answer. I started with an open, and I hope an impartial, mind – except in so far as I have, in general terms, a high opinion of the BBC's reporting and high expectations of its performance, particularly in the area of accuracy and impartiality. The Trust of course shares those expectations, and indeed the BBC as a whole wishes to be judged by the highest standards in those respects.

## Meaning of impartiality

Although "balanced" is a term frequently used as a synonym for "impartial" in everyday language, a moment's reflection will show that it implies a prior choice which may be subjective or even arbitrary, namely the choice of a fulcrum or central point that divides the two "sides" in a dispute or conflict. If this fulcrum shifts, what previously appeared as a balanced presentation, giving equal weight to both sides, can instead be seen as biased and one-sided – and vice versa. Moreover, opinions cannot always be ranged along a single, linear spectrum. This is precisely the point made by the title of the report mentioned above, "From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel", which argues that impartiality should not be defined in terms of balance but rather understood as ensuring that the audience is exposed to, and equipped to evaluate, a broad diversity of opinion and interpretation. This point is reflected in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines: "We must be inclusive, considering the broad perspective and ensuring the existence of a range of views is appropriately reflected... Due impartiality is often more than a simple matter of 'balance' between opposing viewpoints." Indeed, too close an obsession with "balance", in the sense of counting the exact number of minutes of airtime given to each "side" in a dispute, can have a stultifying and distorting effect, and actually prevent journalists from presenting a clear and intelligible analysis of the situation. The BBC rightly aspires to do better than that.

"Equally," the Guidelines go on to say, impartiality "does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles." This language originated as part of a Government amendment to the Broadcasting Act 1990, after concerns had been raised in Parliament that new detailed impartiality requirements might oblige broadcasters to balance any criticism of murderous regimes such as that of Pol Pot in Cambodia. It is clearly highly relevant to coverage of the "Arab Spring" – a series of struggles in which protesters or insurgents have generally claimed to be fighting *for* democracy and *against* regimes which are widely portrayed as murderous, even if not committing mass murder quite on the same scale as the Khmer Rouge. But how should this permission to stray from "absolute neutrality" be interpreted by BBC journalists? Not, surely, as authorising or encouraging them to espouse uncritically the perspective of the insurgents, or to ignore the counterclaims of those defending the political status quo. Certainly none of the BBC correspondents and executives whom I have interviewed would claim such a privilege, or would ever consciously behave in that way. They are all well trained journalists, and an essential element in journalistic training is scepticism. You are

taught not to accept any statement without question – without looking for supporting evidence, and carefully assessing the credibility of the speaker.<sup>4</sup> I believe, therefore, that this phrase in the Guidelines allows journalists to display some degree of attachment to democratic *principles*, but not to exempt any person or group from sceptical scrutiny simply because they advocate democracy or claim to practise it. At most it can be interpreted as meaning that, as more than one BBC executive told me, "We don't ask a despot why he isn't more despotic".

Interestingly, this question also divides the audience. The BBC's domestic audience is, of course, extremely diverse and includes many people who come from, or have close connections with, other parts of the world, including the Middle East. Our Audience Research team therefore recruited – in addition to eight groups comprising a cross section of members of the general public (across the four nations of the UK) – two further groups for interview, made up of "connected audiences" with a personal connection to the countries involved (being either born or brought up there, or having close family links).

Not surprisingly, the "general" groups wanted the news to tell them what effect the events covered might have on the UK, and what role the UK and the West were playing. In these groups there was also broad support in principle for the BBC viewing a move away from dictatorship towards democracy as a positive development. But they did also feel it was important that a pro-democracy position should not be conflated with pro-UK or Western interests, and they asked for broadcasters to show some awareness and acknowledgement of how the Western position on the regime (e.g. in Libya) might have changed over time. Some felt that these conditions had not always been met in the samples of coverage they were shown.

The "connected" groups, however, were less interested in such a focus. Some members of these groups "also felt they had identified a 'pro-democratic' stance from the BBC and tended to be less supportive of this position. This is because they felt being supportive of democracy was too close to a 'pro-western interests' position, which they perceived to be a form of bias."

On one issue, at least, the BBC cannot be neutral. It is in the business of collecting and disseminating information. In many parts of the world – by no means only the Middle East – governments seek to control information, and often to withhold it, while their opponents seek the oxygen of publicity, and especially the ear of the international media. Foreign journalists thus find themselves structurally at odds with the former, and sharing an interest with the latter. They would be almost superhuman if this did not in some degree affect their sympathies as they observe the struggle. The better journalists will be aware

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<sup>4</sup> I asked Ian Pannell, a correspondent who had to report on many emotionally draining scenes in the course of the year, how difficult it was to convey the joy of celebrating crowds while retaining his own professional detachment. He replied: "Experience is the simple answer. Events have a great impact but our job is to reflect the way people regard their circumstances and try to contextualise them as far as you can. The great challenge of the Arab Spring was that one side was desperate for the right to be heard and get the attention of the outside world. The simple answer is that I've done this for a long time, over 20 years – in Kosovo when the Serbs pulled out, in Kabul when the Taliban withdrew. What I find hardest is the pain side of it. Celebration is easier to detach from, but when you see people in a great deal of pain in pursuit of things that we take for granted (I have my own family, three kids)... Emotional detachment is important up to a point but it's also incumbent to try and find a certain verbal way to connect people to the emotional impact – why this matters." (Telephone interview, 12 April 2012.)

of this, and take extra care not to allow those sympathies to influence their analysis and reporting of the facts.

That said, it should be noted that our Audience Research found (p.13) that audiences *want* coverage which is "emotionally engaging", although they feel that this "need not, and should not, come at the expense of accuracy and impartiality". Journalists may therefore feel that they cannot afford to sound too dry and detached, or they risk losing their audience. Those taking part in our research were indeed looking for captivating story-telling from broadcasters. However, they expected the emotion to be conveyed directly from the footage of the events and interviews with people who are affected on the ground, rather than via the tone or language of the journalists.

But impartiality is not simply a matter of avoiding partisanship in particular conflicts, or even of including a sufficiently wide range of voices. One of the principles of impartiality set out in the Editorial Guidelines reads: "We seek to provide a broad range of subject matter and perspectives over an appropriate timeframe across our output as a whole." **It thus falls within the scope of an impartiality review to consider whether all aspects of the story have been adequately covered, or whether, perhaps, the intense focus on certain episodes may have allowed other events, and even whole countries, to forfeit the degree of attention which their importance arguably deserved.**

Finally, I have not – any more than previous reviewers – taken the assessment of "accuracy" as meaning that I should check the facts of every piece of broadcasting on the chosen topic. That would be a gargantuan task, and would imply that a single individual could somehow be expected to know better what was happening, in many varied, complex and fast-moving situations, than the BBC with all its resources for investigation and monitoring. Rather, I have assumed that accuracy, in the sense of a generally accurate description and analysis of events, is the end product and *raison d'être* of impartiality. And I have consulted a number of experts<sup>5</sup> to help me decide how far that overall objective has been achieved.

## Challenges of covering conflict

Nothing in the pages that follow should be taken as implying unawareness of the difficulties and dangers faced by journalists and technicians covering conflict. They are constantly required to make sense – not only for themselves but for their audience – of highly complex events unfolding at bewildering speed. They are frequently denied access to the place where these events are happening. When they do go there they risk getting caught in the crossfire, or even being deliberately targeted. Forty-six journalists and technicians lost their lives covering conflicts in 2011, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists; and – as the BBC's World News Editor Jon Williams puts it – "2012 is already on course to outstrip that grim toll".<sup>6</sup> Many others have been wounded, beaten or imprisoned. The risks have constantly to be assessed, both by reporters on the spot and by the bosses who have to decide where and when to deploy them. When they do go in, journalists may have to accept either being shepherded around by government "minders", or the guidance and protection of activists and rebel fighters. There is no true symmetry between these two experiences. The former generally breeds irritation and resentment, while the latter creates sentiments of gratitude, camaraderie, and often horror or even

<sup>5</sup> Special thanks to Michael Willis, Eugene Rogan, Avi Shlaim, Ahmed Al-Shahi and John Lloyd, who attended an informal meeting to discuss the issues at St Antony's College, Oxford.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/jon\\_williams/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/jon_williams/) (21 February 2012).

guilt at the pain and suffering witnessed. It can seem callous and inhuman in such circumstances to remain a cool, impartial observer, rather than engage in advocacy on behalf of those whose dangers one has shared.

To those general points must be added, in the present case, the sheer size of the story, with dramatic events occurring simultaneously and almost daily, in a whole range of countries from the Atlantic to the Gulf, starting in December 2010 and still in full flow at the time of writing. Covering such a tumultuous tide of news made heavy demands on the BBC's resources, and required difficult choices of its executives, especially as it coincided with other major and long running stories, notably the Japanese earthquake/tsunami and the Eurozone crisis.<sup>7</sup>

The very last thing I should wish this review to do is to aggravate any of these difficulties or dangers. I have therefore approached my task with great humility, not to say trepidation at its magnitude. Another novelty of this review is that, unlike its predecessors, it includes BBC World television<sup>8</sup> and the BBC website in both its UK and international forms<sup>9</sup> – although not World Service radio or the foreign language services. The latter are, until 2014, funded separately by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and are reviewed separately. The exclusion of these services has made my task somewhat more manageable, but none the less seems anomalous – especially on this topic – at a time when, for financial and other reasons, the BBC is moving towards closer integration of the World Service with the rest of the Corporation. One of the things that make the BBC unique is its dual role as both a national and a global news organization. It has to make a special effort to maintain its credibility with, and attractiveness to, a wide range of audiences, as it also does to combine responsible, impartial coverage with lively, incisive reporting.

Overall I stand in awe at its success in meeting these varied requirements. This review does not seek to dispute or diminish that success. I have tried only to examine some questions about the BBC's coverage of the Arab Spring, some of which arise from the

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<sup>7</sup> Not to mention the killing of Osama Bin Laden; the Norway shootings; the Royal Wedding; the English riots during the summer; and the phone-hacking scandal.

<sup>8</sup> This in itself is a vast undertaking. With limited time and resources at our disposal, we have been unable to view large amounts of BBC World output which are not available to the domestic UK audience. We have viewed some output shared by the News Channel and broadcast on domestic channels, and many video items archived on the BBC website, which unfortunately often does not tell you on what outlet the item was broadcast. We have also considered main news programmes (GMT, The Hub and World News Today) and special output such as the World Have Your Say programme on Egypt. And we have interviewed the Director of Global News (Peter Horrocks), the Head of News on BBC World News TV (Andrew Roy), and some correspondents whose output appears mainly on BBC World.

<sup>9</sup> In practice only the domestic version, [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), is available in this country – and while both carry a very full archive, neither enables you to see exactly what would have been available on a given day in the past. Steve Herrmann, who edits both versions, explained to us that there are actually three editions – UK, international and US – but all of the content is available on all three. It is only the selection and prominence on the front page that differs – since each edition has its own front-page editor who arranges the content specifically for its particular audience. Needless to say, international news figures prominently on all three, and stories from the "Arab Spring" have frequently led the front page of the UK edition as well as the other two.

Content Analysis or Audience Research, while others have been raised by outside critics or, in some cases, by people within the BBC itself;<sup>10</sup> and some are the product of my own reflections. Many, if not most, of these questions or criticisms have been addressed not to the BBC only but to "the media" (or the "international" or "Western" media) in general – and in many cases the critics concede that the BBC is not the worst offender. Still, I believe the BBC aspires to an even better rating than that, and I hope that this assessment may succeed in identifying at least a few areas where improvement is possible.

## 1. Framing of the conflict/conflicts

A number of commentators have suggested that the very phrase "Arab Spring" is misleading, and that the media in general have, from the start, reported these events within the framework of a preconceived narrative, which gives the public a wrong impression of what is actually happening.<sup>11</sup> This critique is essentially twofold, and concerns both halves of the phrase. The use of the word "Arab", it is suggested, conveys a false sense of uniformity, implying that the Arab world, or the countries where Arabic is the majority language, form a cultural and political continuum within which politics follows a single pattern, and thus that the various protests, revolts, conflicts and upheavals going on in these countries during 2011 all formed part of a single political phenomenon, whereas in fact they were highly disparate events arising mainly from local causes, and each followed its own distinct course. The word "spring", for its part, is held to convey an implicit expectation that these revolts and protests all betoken a change for the better, and therefore should be welcomed and encouraged, if not actively supported, by the rest of the world.

**Were such assumptions reflected in the language and tone of BBC reporting, especially in the early months or weeks?** Yes, to some extent they were. Our Content Analysis (p.61, Table 45) finds relatively frequent use of the term "Arab Spring", but more frequent use of "Arab uprising/uprisings" and also of "Arab World", in the sample of BBC news items that were examined.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that both journalists and external contributors speaking on the BBC were more wedded to the pan-Arab framework than they were to the specific notion of a "spring", with the positive connotations of that word. In some cases, indeed, they referred to the "so-called Arab Spring". The BBC did use "Arab uprisings" – *not* "Arab Spring" – as a studio "inset" beside the presenter when television news bulletins covered events in more than one Arab country; but when the item covered events in a particular country insets such as "Syria Uprising", "Bahrain Violence", "Tunisia Protests" or "Egypt Days of Protest" were more common.

<sup>10</sup> Over 40 BBC journalists at various levels agreed to be interviewed for this review, either in person or on the telephone, some of them more than once. I am grateful to all of them for their patience and good humour.

<sup>11</sup> Possibly the most radical statement of this view has been made by a former Executive Editor of the BBC College of Journalism and former Editor of the Today programme, Kevin Marsh: "The 'Arab Spring' Did Not Take Place", in John Mair and Richard Lance Keeble, eds., *Mirage in the Desert? Reporting the 'Arab Spring'* (Abramis, 2011), pp. 109-120.

<sup>12</sup> The first person to use the phrase on the BBC may have been James Naughtie, who borrowed it from a newspaper headline: "Well, I suppose it was inevitable that sooner or later someone would call this the Arab Spring ... and there it is on the front page of The Times this morning." (Today programme, 19 February 2011.)

There has been a similar argument about the use of the word "revolution" to describe the upheavals, particularly those in Tunisia and Egypt which appeared to achieve extraordinary success, forcing the abdication of the long-entrenched rulers of those countries, after only a few weeks of largely peaceful protest. Indeed, "revolution" appears as the sixth-most frequently used key word in the BBC news items sampled by our Content Analysis – just behind "democracy" and well ahead of "Arab uprisings or uprising". This has been criticized on the grounds that the changes, particularly in Egypt, turned out to be less sweeping than at first appeared, with the high command of the armed forces keeping power firmly in its own hands. But this seems a somewhat pedantic objection, relying on a more precise and restrictive definition of "revolution" than is reflected in its use in everyday speech. When many thousands of citizens are mobilised in the streets of the capital for weeks on end, and succeed in forcing the departure of a man who has ruled the country for several decades, to most of us that looks and smells like a revolution – and that was certainly how very large numbers of those taking part described it. But did the BBC, by using this term, imply a positive judgement about the outcome? That depends on what view one takes of revolutions in general – a point on which opinions are surely divided. Some of us, like the young Wordsworth, may associate the word with excitement and the prospect of change for the better – "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive"; others, like the same poet in later life, with bloodshed, destruction and disorder. Use of the word left the BBC's audience free to make that choice.

Perhaps the BBC is more vulnerable on its use of the word "regime" – a word that does have clearly pejorative connotations, implying a degree of authoritarianism and perhaps even illegitimacy. The BBC would not, for instance, refer to the British government as "the Cameron regime". The word does appear frequently in broadcasts referring to Arab governments, as is shown by our Content Analysis,<sup>13</sup> and may well come in the category of fair comment, since most of these governments are or were, as a matter of fact, authoritarian. But there does not seem to be clear or consistent guidance on this point. Thus one senior BBC executive<sup>14</sup> told us she thought the word would not be used on the World Service, but might be "OK in a UK context", while another<sup>15</sup> said:

We had a long conversation about Syria – at what point was it legitimate to call the government a regime? For a long time we thought it was not appropriate but as time went on and international support was withdrawn it became more legitimate to call it a regime – there was no single tipping point, though. The Gaddafi government was not elected and there were no institutions. It doesn't function like a nation state – if we had said "government" we would have created the wrong image. In Syria or Iraq we may not like the institutions but they are there, and there is a process by which elections happen etc. Where there is a process however flawed ... it is not legitimate to use "regime" – it is a loaded word.

Whatever the merits or demerits of this suggested distinction, it does not appear to have been applied in any consistent fashion.

But the more important point to make is that journalism is not an exercise in simply relaying raw and untreated "facts" to the audience. On the contrary, and perhaps especially when dealing with international news, the role of the journalist is precisely to select and present the facts in a way that enables the audience to follow and understand

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<sup>13</sup> Table 45, p.63.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Boaden, Director of BBC News, interviewed 23 November 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Jon Williams, World News Editor, interviewed 24 November 2011.

them. This cannot be done without some sort of framework – if you will, a “narrative” – and therefore the construction of such a narrative by journalists should not be treated as if it were a sin in itself. The right questions to ask are (a) whether the narrative offered is on the whole plausible and compatible with the facts, and (b) whether the audience is enabled at least to glimpse the possibility of alternative ways of framing the story.

On the first point, it hardly seems perverse for BBC journalists, and others, to have made a connection between events happening in different Arab countries at more or less the same time, or to have expressed this connection by using phrases containing the word “Arab”. Nor can it be denied that many of these events marked a sharp break with the recent past in the region, which had indeed been characterized by political stability, a lack of basic freedoms such as those of expression and association, and slow rates of economic and social development compared to other parts of the world.<sup>16</sup> Also, while clearly there were specific local factors operating in each Arab country – and the BBC certainly mentioned these – it was equally clear that activists and protesters in each Arab country followed what was going on in the others, and were encouraged, if not inspired, by each other's successes. The BBC would have done no service at all to its audience by ignoring or marginalising these important facts. It is perhaps worth quoting the view of Oxford professor Eugene Rogan, author of *The Arabs: A History*, when interviewed on the Today programme on 1 February 2011.<sup>17</sup> Asked whether he agreed with an assessment by the BBC's correspondent based in Cairo, Jon Leyne, comparing the current events to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Dr Rogan replied:

This is clearly a historic moment of tectonic proportions. I might go back to the events of 1989 rather than the fall of the Ottoman Empire to find a good parallel ... the events that led to the fall of dictatorships in Eastern Europe and the rise of democracies there. And I think that's very much the parallel that the Arabs are comparing themselves to... It's been incredibly exciting to see people in the Arab World asserting their rights to representative government and taking the fear out of public life... Egypt is a huge domino. To see someone like Hosni Mubarak being displaced by popular movements<sup>18</sup> – well, it's really your Erich Honecker moment, when East Germany falls and you realise there isn't a stalwart bastion to keep the old system together. Yes I would expect to see countries like Sudan, the Yemen – I'm really watching what happens in Libya and Algeria with great interest. I think that we could see 2011 prove to be the revolutionary year of the Middle East... I think it would be the beginning of the Arab renaissance that people in the region have been calling for, where they might actually aspire to a level of dignity and of development that would meet their aspirations as people who were at the very heart of the Mediterranean world.

When one of the leading academic experts on the region expresses himself in these terms, it would surely be strange if the BBC did not adopt some such narrative framework as a way of conveying to its audience the significance of what was happening. But perhaps more airtime should have been given to other experts who took a more cautious view than Dr Rogan<sup>19</sup> – insisting more on the diversity of the Arab world, and stressing

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the series of “Arab Human Development Reports” published by the United Nations Development Programme, from 2002 onwards.

<sup>17</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9383000/9383426.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9383000/9383426.stm).

<sup>18</sup> Mubarak did not in fact resign until ten days later.

<sup>19</sup> Though it is fair to note that he himself did say, in the course of the same interview: “we are facing the morning-after question, of what kind of government is going to follow

that behind a few common slogans the protesters in different Arab countries had different agendas, while the regimes, even if none of them could be described as liberal or democratic, were also different in nature, ranging from deeply entrenched monarchies with a degree of religious legitimacy to thinly disguised military dictatorships with long experience of playing off different tribal or confessional groups against each other; and that therefore the outcome of events was likely also to vary widely from one Arab country to another.<sup>20</sup> It is true that correspondents on the ground could be heard warning that, for example, "the situation in Syria is not the same as in Egypt and Tunisia"<sup>21</sup>, or "the crisis [in Lebanon] really has nothing to do with Egypt"<sup>22</sup>, but they added, almost in the same breath, that people in Yemen were "highly influenced by events in Egypt", or that "it takes place as a symptom of the tornado sweeping across this region". The narrative was indeed a powerful one, especially in those early days – all the more so for being espoused at the time by many highly articulate Arabs, as well as Western academics. With hindsight, perhaps it should have been questioned more closely.

In the following sections, I will examine in more detail how the narrative played out, and was adapted, in four Arab countries whose affairs were covered intensely, though sometimes unevenly – Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria – before asking whether others which got relatively little attention should perhaps have had more.

## 2. Egypt

### a. Diversity and representativeness of groups and voices covered

A recurrent criticism of Western media coverage of the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt, is that Western journalists spent time only with those parts of the society with which they had most in common – essentially young, Western-educated, middle-class people, adept at using mobile phones and other "new media" – and that as a result they exaggerated the importance of such people and their ideas, while neglecting other social groups that have different views and interests, and which might in the end prove to be both larger and politically more important. **How far is this true of the BBC? Did it enable its audience to hear a sufficient variety of Egyptian voices? In particular, was there adequate coverage of pro-regime views, and of Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood? And was the coverage too Cairo-centric, neglecting the great mass of Egyptian people who live outside the capital?**

It is true that young, relatively Westernised activists figured prominently in the BBC's coverage of the extraordinary 18 days of street protests that led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. So they did in virtually all other media, including Al Jazeera, and for a good reason. Such people *were* in the lead in the early days, and BBC coverage reflected this. As Tarik Kafala, Middle East Editor at the BBC News website, says, "the protests that overthrew Mubarak *were* led by a certain type of Egyptian and

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these revolutions, and whether the people are going to get something to reward the sacrifices they've made to this point."

<sup>20</sup> Some of these views were expressed, but possibly more could have been. We were not able to measure the amount of airtime given to different expert points of view across the whole range of output.

<sup>21</sup> Lina Sinjab, Today programme 2 February 2011.

<sup>22</sup> James Naughtie, *ibid.*

represented a certain view – the vast majority of Egyptians stayed home. So a small number of protesters overthrew the government – that's a really important news story."<sup>23</sup> But as early as 29 January Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's very sober and careful Middle East Editor, noted that whereas the young "Westernised" figures had initially led things, after dark on the evening of the 28th there was a "sea change": it was no longer just those people on the streets but what he called "the great mass of Cairo's people" – tens if not hundreds of thousands.<sup>24</sup>

Our Content Analysis shows<sup>25</sup> that in Egypt, on the days of broadcasting sampled, anti-government "actors"<sup>26</sup> covered outnumbered pro-government ones by 363 to 241 (while a larger number – 497 – were identified as having "no stance"). Given the diversity of the opposition and the fact that it was they who were making most of the news, this distribution does not seem unreasonable. Jon Leyne adds that

the biggest challenge is getting the point of view of those in power – not so much the public line as how they justify what they're doing to their wives. [Mubarak] was so out-of-touch that his view was very unrealistic. The military were blaming foreign money going to the opposition – but probably didn't believe it themselves. We interviewed Hossam Badrawy, briefly Secretary of the NDP [National Democratic Party] before it dissolved – his argument just wasn't coherent. He talked about the need for Mubarak to stay in office to ensure an orderly transition, but when we asked "what happens when the demonstrations get bigger?" he just said, "we'll deal with them". The elites were so out of touch...<sup>27</sup>

In spite of this, having listened to or viewed all the reports from Egypt on the Today programme and on News at Six and News at Ten during all 18 days of the revolt, I have been struck by the diversity of voices heard.<sup>28</sup> They included not only young Westernised activists but also pro-Mubarak spokesmen (ministers, and members of the ruling National Democratic Party) as well as representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, which did not play a leading role in the early stages of the Egyptian revolt, but soon swung behind it, and emerged at the end of the year as the main winner of the parliamentary elections. Presenters and correspondents at times appeared almost obsessed with the possibility, if not likelihood, that Islamists – and the Brotherhood in particular – might turn out to be the main beneficiaries of the upheaval, especially if it resulted in a "power vacuum". The probability of this happening, and the implications if it did, were the points routinely put to every Western expert and policy-maker; and there were many interviews with members of the Brotherhood itself – some rank-and-file, some described as leaders. All of these

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, 9 January 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Today programme, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9380000/9380544.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9380000/9380544.stm).

<sup>25</sup> Table 34 (p.50).

<sup>26</sup> Defined (p. 4) as "individuals or organisations that have an active presence in reports. They can be mentioned by journalists, pictured, and/or quoted."

<sup>27</sup> Telephone interview, 1 February 2012.

<sup>28</sup> The content research analysed, in depth, coverage from programmes and bulletins across radio, TV and online on six of the 18 days from the start of demonstrations in Tahrir Square to the fall of Mubarak (25-28 January and 10-11 February). In order to be able to take a view of the 12 days in between, I viewed and listened to all relevant reports from the BBC's flagship Today programme and main daily TV bulletins, News at Six and News at Ten.

stressed that their movement favoured freedom and democracy, and did not seek to impose an Islamic order on people against their will. Some of the expert commentators accepted these statements more or less at face value, stressing the Brotherhood's evolution towards pragmatism during its long years in opposition and semi-clandestinity, while others were more sceptical. Conspicuously absent in this phase of coverage, however, whether as subjects or objects of commentary, were the "Salafists" – Islamists more rigid and conservative, though perhaps less organized than the Brotherhood – who later turned out to have widespread popular support and ran second to the Brotherhood in the elections.<sup>29</sup>

Particularly impressive, in expanding the range of Egyptian voices heard, and reminding us of the many, many Cairenes (probably a large majority) who took no part in the events in Tahrir Square, was Jane Corbin's excellent Panorama report, remarkably compiled during those 18 days of protest and screened on what turned out to be the day of Mubarak's abdication. It should also be noted that the BBC had correspondents reporting direct from other large cities where dramatic events were taking place – Wyre Davies in Alexandria and Rupert Wingfield-Hayes in Port Said – while its World Affairs Editor, John Simpson, stopped off at a village in the Nile Delta to talk to a group of farmers still eager to tell the BBC's audience what a good president Mubarak was – although, as Simpson correctly observed, it was in the cities that Egypt's future would be decided.<sup>30</sup>

## b. Euphoria?

A related criticism widely directed at the Western media is that they allowed themselves to be carried away by the drama of events, to the point where they were no longer just reporting the excitement of the crowds in Tahrir Square, but actually joining in and echoing their views. **How far was this true of the BBC?** Helen Boaden, Director of BBC News, believes that it was to some extent: "In the conflict in Egypt in the beginning ... we might have sounded over-excited – you can take on the colour of who you're with. I had to say 'just be careful about your tone.'<sup>31</sup> Inevitably, perhaps, the excitement did infect some of the reporting. On 29 January even Jeremy Bowen could be heard on the Today programme referring to "the great mass of people in Cairo celebrating", and making the surprising claim that "I don't think I've ever really spoken to an Egyptian who doesn't believe that Mubarak is part of the problem, and definitely not part of the solution". But mostly reporters were content to describe the mood in the third person, rather than directly associate themselves with it,<sup>32</sup> and while the astonishing success of a non-violent

<sup>29</sup> Egyptian Salafists made their first appearance on the BBC Website on 7 April in an article by Owen Bennett-Jones: "Salafist groups find footing in Egypt after revolution". As Helen Boaden noted (interview, 23 November 2011), "it did take us a while to understand the Salafists".

<sup>30</sup> News at Ten, 30 January 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, 23 November 2011.

<sup>32</sup> One example among many is George Alagiah on News at Ten, 1 February 2011: "You've only got to be here for a few minutes to get that sense of elation – the ability to speak up for the first time in – what? – 30 years or so..." It should also be noted that our audience sample did rate the clips they were shown of BBC reporting on 11 February – the actual day of Mubarak's fall – less highly for impartiality than those from other days, particularly those later in the year. There might, however, be a difference between audience reaction in "real time" (when the audience itself is likely to share in the excitement of the unfolding drama) and reaction "in cold blood" to a screening a year or so later (when the drama of the moment had passed and the audience would know something about later developments).

protest movement in forcing the departure of a long and firmly established ruler was inevitably emphasized, Bowen and others were careful to say that this did not guarantee a bright future, and that everything was still to play for.

### c. A gap between February and November?

A third criticism concerns the "reduction" of BBC coverage of events in Egypt after what our Content Analysis identifies as "the first peak" in coverage of the Arab Spring as a whole.<sup>33</sup> It suggests that, once Mubarak had fallen, the spotlight shifted rapidly away from Egypt to events in Libya<sup>34</sup> and elsewhere in the region, giving the public the impression that the Egyptian revolution was now over, and even perhaps – with the military's promise to hand over to an elected government – that democracy had been achieved. It also suggests that Egypt was not affected by the second peak ("Phase 2, Wave 2"), but only really came back into focus with the arrival of Phase 3 in late November.

In fact, BBC News and Current Affairs did air a number of good reports from Egypt during the period between February and November, drawing attention to the continuing problems and protests. On 8 May, for instance, Jonathan Head, reporting serious violence between Christians and Muslims, declared on News at Ten that "the post-revolutionary honeymoon is over... What's left is corrosive mistrust and the fear of further attacks." Two days later Jeremy Bowen was back in Cairo, reporting 30% unemployment, a doubling of food prices, and chants against the new military ruler, Field Marshal Tantawi. "Egypt has deep-seated problems... People are spoiling for a fight. There's a lot of tension and uncertainty in the new Egypt. There were high hopes for the future in Tahrir Square, but the reality of trying to build a new society is much harder than anybody expected."<sup>35</sup> And in October this point was brutally confirmed when Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, in a short report aired on News at Six and News at Ten,<sup>36</sup> described "the worst violence since the uprising", in which at least 24 Christians were killed, many of them apparently by the army. "Since January's revolution," he noted, "Egypt is a much freer country, but also more chaotic, and more open to Muslim extremists."

In August there had been several reports on the opening of Mubarak's trial,<sup>37</sup> and Newsnight had aired an outstanding report by Mark Urban covering demands for a

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<sup>33</sup> Page 26. The analysis divides the BBC coverage that it sampled into several distinct phases, viz:

Phase 1: 19 Dec 2010 – 14 Jan 2011 (coverage emerges)

Phase 2, Wave 1: 25 Jan 2011 – 15 May 2011 (the rise and reduction of a first peak in coverage)

Phase 2, Wave 2: 30 July 2011 – 21 October 2011 (the rise of a second peak in coverage)

Phase 3: 22 November 2011 – 25 Jan 2012 (a reduction in the intensity of Arab Spring coverage).

<sup>34</sup> The reasons why Libya attracted so much more attention are explored in the next chapter.

<sup>35</sup> News at Ten, 10 May 2011.

<sup>36</sup> 10 October 2011.

<sup>37</sup> News at Six and News at Ten, 3 August 2011. Jon Williams considers this "the most important thing that happened [in Egypt] between February and November", and is very proud that the BBC World Affairs Editor John Simpson (who had also covered the execution of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the trial of Milosevic in the Hague) was "the only

"second revolution" and the tensions between the Muslim Brotherhood and "those most friendly to Western values". The latter, he noted, were often "not in touch with those they're trying to help" (i.e. they lacked an effective presence in the poorer districts), and it was the Brotherhood that was stepping into the vacuum left by a demoralised police force and other failing public services. "The people coming to the street are getting angrier and angrier..." (because of low wages and unemployment), "... and this is Cairo today." Urban also noted that Friday prayers in Tahrir Square dominated by the Salafists, with a Wahhabi imam preaching in a Saudi dialect, had been attended by hundreds of thousands of people, whereas none of the liberal parties had been able to bring these numbers to the square. The two Islamist parties between them, he concluded presciently, might well win a majority in the coming parliamentary elections.<sup>38</sup>

And in July, six months after Mubarak's fall, BBC News had done a four-night televised update on the Arab Spring, with items on both News at Six and News at Ten.<sup>39</sup> This opened and closed with reports from Egypt (the first by George Alagiah, the last by Jeremy Bowen), and included items on Tunisia and Syria. But once again, Libya was the meat in the sandwich, occupying both the middle evenings of the series.

Taking the period from April to October as a whole, reports on Egypt on the two main TV news bulletins of the day were few and far between. Altogether, news packages from Egypt (excluding voiced-over pictures) during this period were running at around 3% of coverage of Arab Spring items on News at Six and 4% on News at Ten. On Radio 4's Today programme, with three hours available, the corresponding figure was approximately 9%. The average across all three programmes was just under 6%.<sup>40</sup>

There is some discomfort about this within the BBC's own ranks. According to Peter Horrocks, Director of Global News, "the most significant editorial shortcoming was in Egypt, where people were still being mistreated [after February]. Given the centrality of Egypt there wasn't sufficient coverage of the fact that reform wasn't happening between the Arab Spring and when Egypt came back into the news in November, by which time we could see it had gone wrong... There can be a story where something is *not* happening. Also the rise of the Salafists –who are they and where have they come from?"<sup>41</sup> Jeremy Bowen, too, feels that there was "not enough Egypt in March and April".<sup>42</sup> And Stephen Mitchell, Deputy Director and Head of Programmes, BBC News, says:

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British TV reporter to be in court". "In the Arab world seeing a former head of state wheeled into court on a bed was a seismic moment, and I absolutely believe that we captured that moment." (Telephone interview, 5 April 2012.)

<sup>38</sup> 3 August 2011.

<sup>39</sup> 11-14 July 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Source: analysis of BBC output by the project team for this Review. During these months the Today programme carried, among other items highlighting the difficulty of the path to democracy in Egypt, a three-day special with James Naughtie in Cairo, on 28, 30 and 31 May. Elsewhere in Radio 4 current affairs Edward Stourton asked if the revolution spelt the end of old-style Islamism in an Analysis programme, "Egypt's New Islamists", on 13 June; and Crossing Continents also raised questions about the future of the revolution in "Egypt: Sisters of the Revolution" on 14 April.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, 10 January 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, 3 February 2012. (In April, News at Ten ran one item on Egypt.)

I think we were at risk of feeling that in some way the issue or the story had moved on. Perhaps not enough effort or questioning went into that. I do remember some quite rigorous discussion about the nature of the regime that followed immediately on, which was basically a military dictatorship, but possibly we didn't stay with it.<sup>43</sup>

As a result the renewed coverage in November, with a prevailing tone far more cautious, even gloomy, suggested a more abrupt and unexpected change in the situation than there had really been. Viewers and listeners, especially on the BBC's main domestic news bulletins, had not been fully alerted to the continuing dominance of the army during the intervening period, or to the numerous acts of repression and attacks on women, which arguably went beyond what had been common under Mubarak (although of course there was also far more in the way of public protest and criticism).

From late November 2011 to early February 2012, with renewed mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square, the Islamist victory in the parliamentary elections, the Port Said football riots and the anniversary of Mubarak's fall, Egypt was again the subject of fairly intense coverage, with – as already noted – a somewhat gloomier or more pessimistic tone than a year earlier.<sup>44</sup> Our Audience Research found that this tone was appreciated by the sample groups interviewed, who considered it more impartial than that of the earlier reports they were shown.

### 3. Libya

From mid-February to October 2011 Libya, with a population of 6.4 million people (compared to over 80 million in Egypt), took up a far larger share of the BBC's airtime than any other Arab country. There were a number of reasons for this:

- Libya's proximity to Europe, combined with its very substantial oil production and proven reserves (10<sup>th</sup> largest in the world), gives it considerable strategic importance.
- For 41 years before the revolt against him erupted in February 2011 Libya had been ruled by one of the more colourful figures on the world stage, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, whose persona and pronouncements were familiar to much of the British public. In particular, he had been credited with supplying arms and explosives to the IRA, and with responsibility for the fatal shooting of a British policewoman in London in 1984, as well as many acts of terrorism, including notably the destruction of an airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988. After a long period under international sanctions because of this, Gaddafi had handed over two suspects for trial by a Scottish court, one of whom had been convicted and was serving a sentence of life imprisonment in Scotland until released on compassionate grounds in August 2009, in circumstances of maximum controversy. Meanwhile Gaddafi, having renounced his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, had staged a spectacular rapprochement with Western countries including Britain, strongly encouraged by then Prime Minister Tony Blair; and his son Saif al-Islam had become both a doctoral student and a major benefactor of

<sup>43</sup> Telephone interview, 5 April 2012.

<sup>44</sup> As our Content Analysis notes (p.35), in this phase "There was an increasing recognition by BBC journalists of the ambiguity of events, both prior and current."

the London School of Economics. The domestic audience's interest in the fate of Gaddafi and his family was therefore practically guaranteed.

- The revolt against Gaddafi which broke out in Benghazi on 16 February 2011 and quickly spread to other parts of the country was dramatic and fast-moving, and led to a civil war marked by further dramatic twists and turns including the fall of Tripoli in late August and the killing of Gaddafi himself in October.
- This outcome was due in no small part to a sustained bombing campaign against Gaddafi's forces carried out by NATO countries, claiming authority from a UN Security Council resolution which authorised the use of "all necessary means", short of deploying ground troops, to protect civilians in Libya.
- The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, played a significant part in securing the adoption of that resolution and bringing about the NATO intervention, and British aircraft likewise had a major role in the bombing campaign itself.

**How did the BBC handle this story?** Several related but distinct questions arise.

**a. Did BBC reporters take sides in the conflict, allowing themselves to be swept up in the excitement and enthusiasm of the revolt?**

This is essentially the same question of "euphoria" asked above about Egypt. In the Libyan case, however, it may not be quite so easy to answer. Here the disparity between "pro-government" and "anti-government" actors revealed by the Content Analysis<sup>45</sup> is much wider, with the latter outnumbering the former by nearly three to one. And people within the BBC seem less sure of their ground. Helen Boaden says: "in Libya too where we were essentially embedded [sc. with the rebels] at the start we might have sounded over-excited – you have to be careful if you can't get to the other side of the story."<sup>46</sup> Indeed Jon Leyne, one of the correspondents so "embedded" – reporting the early days of the revolt from the rebel headquarters in Benghazi – has himself referred to "moments of crazy exhilaration, from which it has been impossible to be immune".<sup>47</sup>

Interviewed for this review,<sup>48</sup> Leyne added: "in Benghazi there was only one point of view. It wasn't spin – everybody was thinking the same thing." He speaks with the authority of someone who crossed the Egyptian border within a week of the revolt breaking out, to film and report "delirious scenes of joy in eastern Libya, where the opposition is in control". Leyne went on to say: "So this is Libya – free Libya, as these people have it. It is completely free of Colonel Gaddafi's forces. There are no soldiers here, no representatives of the hated government anywhere near here... Anyone associated with Colonel Gaddafi has fled." Free perhaps, but also chaotic, and frightening at least for some: on the Egyptian side of the border Leyne filmed "thousands of migrant workers escaping from the mayhem that is Libya today" – one of whom tells him "it's a massacre", though without making clear who was massacring whom.<sup>49</sup> Five days later, in Benghazi, Leyne reported on "the slightly dizzy atmosphere here. There is a mixture of elation, grief and

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<sup>45</sup> Table 34 (p.50).

<sup>46</sup> Interview, 23 November 2011.

<sup>47</sup> "The Reverberating Echo Chamber – Beyond the Spectacle", in Mair and Keeble, *Mirage in the Desert?* (op. cit.), p. 41.

<sup>48</sup> 1 February 2012.

<sup>49</sup> News at Ten, 22 February 2011.

anger – a fervent hope and belief that life is utterly changing and about to get almost infinitely better.”<sup>50</sup>

On the other side of the country Ian Pannell filed a vivid report for Newsnight<sup>51</sup> from an unnamed small town in the Sahara,<sup>52</sup> close to the Tunisian border and also in rebel hands. “Welcome to the Western Front,” he declared. “The revolt against repressive rule in the Arab World is infectious, and even the wilderness of the Sahara Desert is alive with the sound of rebellion... That night, people took to the streets again.” (Shots of chanting crowds in darkened streets.) “This is what freedom looks like in Libya – people expressing their views for the first time. No longer watched, listened to and controlled, they call for Gaddafi to leave.”

Such reports are not exactly “impartial”, but how could they be? In all cases, the reporters were careful to stress the rebels’ shortcomings in both weapons and organization, and also their growing fear and appeals for help as Gaddafi’s far better armed and more disciplined forces began to regain territory and close in on the rebel strongholds, including Benghazi. Our Audience Research revealed that viewers and listeners strongly supported reporters “being there on the ground”. Reports where audiences could see what was happening first hand at the frontline were judged positively in terms of being both engaging and accurate. No doubt these reports, along with similar and in some cases more directly partisan ones in other media, helped stimulate empathy for the rebel cause among the British public, and thereby to facilitate, if not actually bring about, the NATO intervention – as similar reports had done in northern Iraq as long ago as 1991. But BBC programmes did also go to considerable lengths to report the statements of Colonel Gaddafi, members of his family, and officials of his regime, as well as filming many of the frequent demonstrations against NATO organized by his supporters in Tripoli. Indeed, a point made repeatedly to us by BBC journalists and executives was that the BBC was the only international broadcasting organization that kept a full camera team in Tripoli throughout the war. And although Helen Boaden used the word “embedded” as a descriptive term for travelling with the rebels, this did not imply that the same conditions operated as for correspondents with British or American forces in Afghanistan or Iraq. In Libya, correspondents on the rebel side had much greater freedom to move around and to interview a wide variety of people out of earshot of the authorities than did their colleagues in Tripoli, who were generally confined to the Rixos Hotel and allowed out only for set-piece tours or visits accompanied by official “minders”.

According to David Jordan, the BBC’s Director of Editorial Policy and Standards, there was a debate within the BBC “when we felt we were not being as assiduous as we could be about telling people the circumstances in which we were reporting [from Tripoli]. We were not assiduous and then became assiduous. It is important, as people assume we are reporting free from restrictions unless we say we are not. We must let the viewer know the conditions under which we report – and consistently.”<sup>53</sup> This “assiduity” was certainly in evidence by 14 April, when Jeremy Bowen was taken by Libyan officials to see a university cafeteria which had been damaged by a NATO airstrike on a nearby military base. When he tried to film the base the officials confiscated the memory card from his camera. Viewers of News at Ten were treated to footage of his argument with the officials, at the end of which Bowen turned to the camera and concluded, almost

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12593058>, 27 February 2011.

<sup>51</sup> 1 March 2011.

<sup>52</sup> “For security reasons, it’s not safe to say where we are.”

<sup>53</sup> Interview, 23 November 2011.

triumphantly: "They're trying to control the message – they want that filmed [pointing at the café], but not that [the military base]." In our audience research, the reports which used these methods were welcomed for the insight they gave into the methods and motivations of the Gaddafi regime, as long as it was made clear what the restrictions were.

On 28 February, with colleagues from CNN and the Sunday Times, Bowen obtained the only interview with Gaddafi screened by any Western media during the whole course of the civil war.<sup>54</sup> A Panorama documentary "Fighting Gaddafi"<sup>55</sup> was filmed (as its name suggests) from the rebel side, but included at the end a substantial interview with Gaddafi's son Saadi, giving him the opportunity to deny the claim that he had ordered troops and helicopters to fire on unarmed demonstrators in Benghazi at the beginning of the revolt. (The somewhat unusual location for this interview – in front of the lions' cage in Tripoli zoo – was apparently chosen by Mr Gaddafi, not by Panorama.) It is not clear that giving more airtime to statements and interviews of this kind would have done anything to improve Gaddafi's image with the British public. Nor is it clear how easy it would have been for the BBC to find "ordinary" Libyans who would have expressed unfeigned and unscripted enthusiasm for his cause.<sup>56</sup>

Even if reports from the ground tended – without directly advocating it – to become part of the argument for external intervention on humanitarian grounds, that case did not go unquestioned in studio discussions. On 19 March, for instance – the day the NATO action began – Evan Davis on the Today programme interviewed Sir Max Hastings, the prominent military historian and former editor of the Daily Telegraph, who asked:

What are our objectives, and are they attainable? Some of us are very dissatisfied that the objectives have been identified or that they can be achieved.

Conceding that it might prove relatively easy to topple Gaddafi, Sir Max went on to say:

But I don't think we should fool ourselves for a moment that we won't then have a responsibility for Libya, which I think we're going to find extraordinarily difficult to fulfil... I'm not sure that it's good enough to send in jets and to start military

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<sup>54</sup> And the following day he reported that "Colonel Gaddafi has genuine support here", before going on to describe a demonstration by anti-regime activists in one of the suburbs. (News at Six, 1 March 2011.) See also, much later in the war, a radio documentary about Libyan refugees in Tunisia, in which the presenter (Bill Law) makes the remark: "Gaddafi still commands loyalty which the West would be best advised not to discount". (Crossing Continents, Radio 4, 21 July 2011.)

<sup>55</sup> BBC One, 21 March 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Rana Jawad, the BBC's Tripoli reporter, elaborates this point: "Under the Gaddafi regime it was almost impossible to tell whether 'supporters' were genuine supporters or not. I can tell you that it was incredibly difficult and yes we did try. I even had it in one of my blog entries when I had a chat with a neighbour who sympathized with Gaddafi because 'he's old', and who believed that the yogurt produced in Misurata was poisoned because state media said so. My colleagues in Tripoli were bound to a hotel with minders constantly following them. The instinct in that situation for any journalist/reporter is to chase the other side, which the government was seemingly hiding. That said, I think the BBC gave adequate airtime to the regime's statements/interviews. It's not our job to improve or tarnish anyone's image, our job is to present both sides of a story to the best of our ability and present facts to the best of our knowledge." (Email to the author, 3 April 2012.)

interventions rather in the same spirit as sending Oxfam to deliver aid... What is our national interest in Libya?

Two days later, from a very different part of the political spectrum, Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn warned that the operation might lead to a partition of Libya "into a failed state in the west and a client state in the east", adding that he was "just not sure how carefully this whole thing has been thought through".<sup>57</sup> Such comments and questions – notably about the interpretation of the UN resolution and whether Britain would get dragged into an unending strife like that in Iraq – were to be heard fairly frequently around this time on several BBC outlets, including Newsnight.<sup>58</sup>

**b. A more specific accusation levelled against the Western media is that, while devoting a great deal of energy to reporting and documenting atrocities committed by Gaddafi's regime, both in the 41 years of its absolute power and during the conflict which led to its downfall, they did not show the same zeal in investigating and reporting human rights violations by his opponents.**

This charge is laid specifically against the BBC by Minority Rights Group International (MRG),<sup>59</sup> in a detailed submission made to this review. The submission points out that

The outbreak of armed conflict in Libya led to large-scale population displacement and refugee flight, numbering some quarter of a million in the first month alone, and believed to total an estimated one million over the duration of the conflict. Most of those fleeing were migrant workers and their families, as well as Libyan nationals.

This outflow included British expatriates, whose repatriation was the British government's most immediate priority when the conflict broke out, and not surprisingly was covered by the BBC in some detail. It also included people from neighbouring Arab states – such as the Egyptians interviewed by John Leyne above. But, says MRG, "according to the International Organization on Migration, the great majority of the 1.5 million irregular migrant workers among Libya's population of some 6.5 million were sub-Saharan Africans, for whom escape routes were harder for both geographical and political reasons".

The allegation that "African mercenaries" were fighting on Gaddafi's side, and using especially barbarous methods, was a *leitmotiv* of statements by his opponents from very early on. On 21 February the BBC's Ian Pannell reported<sup>60</sup> that "the Libyan delegation at the UN says it'll resign, calling for the international community to close the air space over the country, to stop mercenaries being flown in – in their words, 'to prevent a genocide'". The following day, according to the BBC website,<sup>61</sup> a "Tripoli citizen told BBC Arabic that the only people on the streets were police, soldiers and African mercenaries." And on 27 February both Jon Leyne on News at Six and Gavin Hewitt on News at Ten recorded interviews with an oil worker evacuated from the oil town of Brega who said "they captured some of these mercenaries in Brega – they did enter Brega, the mercenaries,

<sup>57</sup> Today programme, Monday 21 March 2011

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9431000/9431263.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9431000/9431263.stm).

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Newsnight (BBC Two) 17, 18 and 21 March 2011; The World Tonight (Radio 4) 18 and 21 March 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Declaration of interest: the author served on MRG's Council from 1999 to 2007, the last two years as Chair.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12533069>

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12556005>

and they did kill some Libyans." But the following day Michael Buchanan (reporting for Radio 4's PM programme, Radio 5 Live and the World Service) actually interviewed some of the black Africans who had fled Benghazi and were trying to cross into Egypt, in fear of their lives. They told him they had suffered attacks and threats by young people (including "six-to-ten year-old boys") who "said the President had hired some blacks to kill the Libyans".<sup>62</sup>

Were there, in fact, African mercenaries? According to the MRG submission, "most of the allegations about Colonel Gaddafi's use of mercenaries were not proven at the time and continue to be unestablished", but served as a pretext for the mistreatment of migrant workers, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa. Other sources say it is possible that there were some mercenaries, and that some of them manning military equipment were killed in NATO airstrikes; others may have fled. But little hard evidence has emerged. What has emerged is that armed units from some sub-Saharan countries, notably Libya's immediate southern neighbours (Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali), were present in Libya during the conflict, and some of them may have taken part in the fighting on Gaddafi's side. Even so, it is questionable whether they could accurately be described as mercenaries. They were members of armed factions whom Gaddafi had supported at one time or other against the incumbent governments of their countries, as part of his activist (some would say expansionist) foreign policy. They therefore had reasons of both gratitude and self-interest for seeking to help him stay in power. But they were not mercenaries in the classic sense of soldiers brought in from abroad for the sole purpose of fighting in a civil conflict and doing so only for pay.<sup>63</sup>

MRG alleges that "by March many BBC reports directly referred to mercenaries operating in Libya and BBC reporters, including senior security and defence correspondents, themselves speculated about the recruitment and employment of mercenaries". Our own researches have not turned up any clear examples of this – and in any case it can be argued that, in the absence of hard facts, "speculation" is part of such correspondents' job. But Justin Webb, a presenter on the Today programme, went rather further on 19 March<sup>64</sup> while interviewing the Libyan deputy foreign minister. "It's true, isn't it," he asked, "that [the forces supporting Gaddafi] are not really made up of Libyans – they're actually mostly mercenaries from abroad?" When this question elicited a denial, Webb went on to assert that "countless foreign reporters have come across people that are very obviously foreign. I mean, that's well known, isn't it?" This was probably intended as a particular line of questioning, aimed at provoking the interlocutor into a clear statement – presumably a denial. But the questions took the form of somewhat vigorous and categorical assertions, which certainly could have given the listener the impression that the questioner was stating facts for which he has solid evidence – an impression which in this case appears to have been misleading. In any event, it is noticeable that Sir Menzies Campbell, former leader of the Liberal Democrat party, who said on the same programme two days later<sup>65</sup> that "the documented behaviour of Colonel Gaddafi and his troops,

<sup>62</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk-only/9410561.stm>

<sup>63</sup> See Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya ([http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/163](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/163)), paragraphs 58-60. I am grateful to Oliver Miles, chairman of MEC International and former British ambassador in Libya, for drawing my attention to this useful document.

<sup>64</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9429000/9429810.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9429000/9429810.stm)

<sup>65</sup> Today, 21 March 2011, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9431000/9431263.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9431000/9431263.stm).

*particularly the mercenaries*, has been brutal and unpleasant in a way which simply can't be tolerated, and that's why intervention in this case is justified", was not challenged by the interviewer (John Humphrys) on this point at all.

Much of what is now known about the "African mercenaries" could probably have been discovered at the time, if BBC reporters had made a greater effort to find out who these alleged mercenaries were, how many of them were fighting, or what might be their motive for doing so.<sup>66</sup> Reporters might not have been able to do this in February or March, but perhaps it could have been done during the succeeding months, when the front between Gaddafi and his opponents was fairly stable and there was much talk of "stalemate".<sup>67</sup> It appears that they were not under any great pressure from the newsroom in London to follow up this story, and did not themselves see it as a priority.

Meanwhile, many civilian migrant workers from sub-Saharan countries, and some dark-skinned indigenous Libyans, were the object of serious human rights violations, probably on both sides of the line but certainly in rebel-controlled areas. The BBC did report from time to time on the exodus of migrants from the country.<sup>68</sup> But, as the MRG submission points out, the space devoted to this aspect of the conflict was relatively small, given that the scale of the displacement was "broadly equivalent to the flight of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo" in 1999. The fact that the majority of refugees were sub-Saharan Africans and black Libyans was not emphasized. Nor, except in Michael Buchanan's report quoted

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<sup>66</sup> I asked Ian Pannell whether there had been discussion about the "mercenaries" story either in the newsroom or among teams on the ground. He said that there had been, and pointed to two pieces he had done soon *after* the fall of Tripoli (11 and 18 September), when "it became apparent that there was a campaign to send away groups of people, including African immigrants". It would, he added, have been "almost impossible to investigate earlier", though he thought there had been "an element of questioning" when people in Benghazi were arrested and "the rebels were claiming they were mercenaries". (Telephone interview, 12 April 2012.) He stressed, however, that he "could of course not know what discussions were being had with other teams who, like Jon Leyne in Benghazi, were covering this part of the story"; and added that in hostile environments the normal business of journalistic checks and balances "can be a much slower and longer-term process". (Email, 27 April.) Jon Leyne for his part says: "There probably *were* some African mercenaries. Perhaps we didn't show enough scepticism at the beginning. But then – after a couple of weeks – they did a press conference where they produced some, and it was a pretty sceptical journalistic crowd." (Telephone interview, 1 February 2012.) We have not found any report on this press conference in the BBC's broadcast output, or on the website.

<sup>67</sup> On this point, Pannell replied: "Yes perhaps, but there's always a problem with rotating teams – when you arrive, there's inevitably a sense of going over some of the same ground, you don't know exactly where you are on the story. And the correspondents weren't in the major urban centres where the African migrants were based. Still, I guess it's a reasonable point that there would have been an opportunity earlier..."

<sup>68</sup> In June BBC Two carried a well-observed hour-long documentary made by an independent production company "The Invasion of Lampedusa"(This World, 14 June 2011, 1900hrs), which referred to migrants fleeing turmoil in North Africa. But filming was carried out on the island in March, when those arriving in Lampedusa were Tunisian. The film documents the removal of the Tunisian refugees to Sicily, but when it was aired the director Olly Lambert wrote on the BBC website that the island faced a new "invasion ... Libyan and sub-Saharan refugees coming in far bigger boats, and in increasing numbers". (bbc.co.uk, 14 June 2011)

above, were the reasons for their flight explored, beyond using general terms such as "fleeing from the terror and the turmoil that is Colonel Gaddafi's Libya".<sup>69</sup>

As early as May 2011, Amnesty International submitted a memorandum to the National Transitional Council (NTC – the umbrella body of the then opposition), detailing patterns of abuses by then opposition fighters, including torture of detainees and deliberate killings of captured fighters and detainees.<sup>70</sup> But it was only when the rebels began to gain the upper hand, and particularly after the fall of Tripoli in August, that the BBC's main domestic bulletins began to turn their attention to human rights violations committed by that side. Even then, migrant workers were implicitly grouped, if not equated, with "mercenaries". For instance it was under the heading "Gaddafi's African 'mercenaries' leaving Libya" that visitors to the BBC website could learn, on 27 August, that the International Organisation for Migration was "desperate to reach sub-Saharan migrant workers caught up in the fighting in Libya", and that its representative in Benghazi, Martin Jerrett, had said "Africans were facing deep hostility in the capital, Tripoli".<sup>71</sup>

### **c. Was the BBC's approach affected by the involvement of Britain and NATO on one side of the conflict?**

In various ways, yes. Involvement of British forces, even though not ground troops, inevitably heightens interest for channels catering mainly for a domestic audience. This involvement clearly accounts, at least in part, for the heavy concentration of resources in, and devotion of airtime to, Libya as compared to other parts of the region. Jeremy Bowen feels, with hindsight, that "last year we did a great job in Libya, but at times put too many eggs in that basket".<sup>72</sup> Unsurprisingly, Jon Williams, describing himself as "the person who put the eggs into the basket",<sup>73</sup> does not agree – and he specifically gives Britain's involvement as the reason for this:

You need to start from where the UK audience is – there's a particular resonance in terms of Gaddafi, Lockerbie, Saif and LSE, and the way Blair drove the relationship to get them to renounce their nuclear programme after Iraq.

Also, one of the overriding responsibilities of a public service broadcaster is to hold elected officials to account. When Britain goes to war our overriding responsibility is to hold to account the people who've taken those decisions... If you were to boil back and the BBC were to stop doing everything else, [the responsibility that's left] would be to hold elected officials to account. Waging war is perhaps the biggest responsibility that a prime minister can take, and when he does take the country to war we've got a real responsibility.<sup>74</sup>

This is indeed a strong argument. I will consider in a later chapter whether it fully justifies the overwhelming interest the BBC showed in the Libyan story as compared to others in the region, and what the wider consequences may have been. What needs saying here is that "interest" in this sense is not the same as bias, and there is no evidence that support for "our boys" (a phrase that the BBC now scrupulously avoids) on this occasion had any

<sup>69</sup> Ben Brown, News at Six, 1 March 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Amnesty International, *Militias Threaten Hopes for New Libya* (London 2012), p.6.

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14693343>.

<sup>72</sup> Interview, 3 February 2012.

<sup>73</sup> BBC news management stresses, however, that this was not a purely personal decision.

<sup>74</sup> Telephone interview, 5 April 2012.

direct effect on the *way* the conflict was reported. We have seen that reporters did not always conceal their distaste or contempt for Colonel Gaddafi and his regime,<sup>75</sup> or their sympathy for those trying to overthrow him. But this is surely attributable more to their interaction with Libyans on the ground than to any solidarity with British pilots somewhere in the sky above. If anything, the reverse. British involvement led, as Williams implies, to more intense and sceptical questioning of the British government itself,<sup>76</sup> and also of the rebels who had become, in effect its protégés – on the lines of "who are these people we're supporting and what kind of new regime might they create?"<sup>77</sup>

## 4. Bahrain

Bahrain, an island in the Persian Gulf close to the Saudi coast (to which it is now joined by a causeway), is the smallest independent Arab state. None the less it has considerable strategic importance, not so much for its oil reserves, which are small compared to those of its neighbours and rapidly depleting, as for its port (the best natural harbour between Oman and the Shatt al-Arab), its role as a financial centre and US naval base, and its delicately poised situation – between Arabia and Iran, and between Sunni and Shia Islam. Iran dropped its territorial claim in 1970 (the year before Bahrain became independent after over a century of British "protection"), but continues to take a lively interest in the welfare of Bahrain's Shia inhabitants, to the discomfiture of the ruling al-Khalifa dynasty, which is Sunni.

The precise demographic make-up of the country is disputed. Some 66-70% of Bahrain's 568,000 citizens are believed to be Shia Muslims, the remainder being Sunni. But both are outnumbered by the expatriates or non-nationals (mainly Asian and Arab), who numbered 666,000 in 2010. The Shia are thus a majority among Bahraini nationals but no longer among the total resident population – and the government has recently engaged in "ethnic engineering" to redress the Sunni-Shiite imbalance by granting citizenship to Sunni Arabs. The Shia consider themselves the object of discrimination and in some cases persecution, and have agitated since the 1990s for a more democratic system of government, while many Sunnis fear that conceding this demand would make *them* a persecuted minority and perhaps subject them to an Iranian-style Shia theocracy. These tensions existed long before the Arab Spring, but it was hardly on the cards that Bahrain would be unaffected by the tide of change flowing through the Arab world after the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian rulers. Equally, in such a polarised society, it was inevitable that foreign media coverage would be accused of bias by one side or other, if not both. And the BBC has not been exempt.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> A particularly nice example is the comment of Middle East correspondent Kevin Connolly on the Today Programme, 28 February 2011, when he reported visiting a building in Benghazi built as "a temple to Gaddafi's Green Book, which contained the full spectrum of his thought, from the banal to the barking".

<sup>76</sup> See, among many examples, Hardtalk interview with Foreign Secretary William Hague on 7 July 2011, (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/hardtalk/9532641.stm>)

<sup>77</sup> The BBC's Diplomatic Correspondent, Bridget Kendall, who was in Benghazi in May 2011, told us: "my remit at the time was to work out who the NTC were – and what might happen afterwards". (Interview, 9 February 2012.)

<sup>78</sup> No formal complaints have been logged with the BBC, but there have been attacks on it in the pro-government Bahraini media, and both executives and correspondents report many informal complaints. See in particular Frank Gardner below.

A widespread perception among critics of Western policy in the region is that not only governments but also the international media (including, in this case, Al Jazeera) have applied a double standard – allowing the monarchy (or "regime") in Bahrain to get away with egregious human rights violations, while championing the victims of such violations in Iran, North Africa and the Levant and, in the Libyan case, even making them a *casus belli*. This perception was reinforced by the relatively sparse coverage given to Bahrain across all media once hostilities got going in Libya. It was therefore the charge that I expected BBC executives to answer when I first mentioned Bahrain in my interviews with them. To my surprise, it was not. Rather than seek to rebut any suggestion of undue reticence about, or kid-glove treatment of, the Bahraini monarchy, they seemed rather to anticipate criticism from the opposite quarter, and volunteered acknowledgement of a degree of partiality, during the first weeks of the disturbances, in favour of the opposition.

Thus Fran Unsworth, Head of Newsgathering, says: "we struggled initially to get the complexities across. The tendency of news bulletins to default to shorthand sometimes means it is more difficult to tell a complex story,"<sup>79</sup> while World News Editor Jon Williams told us<sup>80</sup> he was worried "that in Bahrain at the beginning we viewed this through the prism of what was going on elsewhere – a default narrative about a Shia majority oppressed by a Sunni minority, but it is more complex than that". He believed this error had been corrected later on – "impartiality was achieved over time", while Peter Horrocks, Director of Global News, added<sup>81</sup> that "in Bahrain, it's important to understand the Sunni perspective on the insurgent threat ... not to excuse, but to explain why the regime was responding the way it was". He was not alone in feeling that the BBC had redeemed itself in April when it sent in Frank Gardner, the BBC's Security Correspondent, who has long experience of the region (including being shot and disabled by Al-Qaeda sympathizers in Saudi Arabia in 2004) and had even lived for a time in Bahrain. This experience and background knowledge, BBC executives felt, enabled Gardner to give a more rounded and impartial account of the conflict in Bahrain than his colleagues had been able to do earlier in the year. And Gardner himself was quite clear about this. "There most definitely was a problem last year," he told us. "That's why I went..."

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>82</sup>

Not all BBC executives shared this perception, however. Notably James Stephenson, editor of the two main televised news bulletins, News at Six and News at Ten, said that he was not aware of any chronological shift. "I don't think we veered at all."<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Email to author, 4 April 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Interview, 24 November 2011.

<sup>81</sup> Interview, 10 January 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Interview, 6 February 2012. Gardner has since clarified that by "we" he meant the international media as a whole, and did not intend to single out the BBC. (Email to author, 10 April 2012.)

<sup>83</sup> Interview, 7 February 2012.

In assessing the BBC's coverage of Bahrain, it is therefore necessary to begin by looking in detail at **the tone and content of BBC reporting during the first weeks of the disturbances, in February and March.**

The 2011 wave of protest in Bahrain began on 14 February. Given that this was three days after the fall of Mubarak and coincided with protests in a wide range of other Arab countries, it is hardly surprising that the BBC presented it in that context. By the 16<sup>th</sup> one of the BBC's Middle East correspondents, Ian Pannell, had arrived on the spot and was filing for News at Ten. Presenter Huw Edwards introduced him with the words "Unrest is still affecting parts of the Middle East." Pannell himself then began by showing the funeral of "a young man whose only crime was to call for change in his country", who had been shot in the back by police. "What he wanted was a new constitution for his country, the release of political detainees and an end to the rule by what many here say was a privileged elite." One of the mourners was shown saying, "Anything that happens in Egypt will affect all Arab countries", after which Pannell informed viewers that "this region is hugely important to Britain and America, not just for its oil but as a strategic military hub". There was then a brief shot of King Hamad, who "has apologized for the deaths, promising swift action and more reform", while "tonight the government said it's willing to talk with the opposition". And Pannell concluded:

So once again street protests are hitting another Arab capital. They've seen what happened in Tunisia and Cairo, and are hoping to replicate it here – and their demands are pretty similar, above all an end to the old order ... This may not look like a new Arab world taking shape, but as they bed in for the night these protesters present a serious challenge to the family that's ruled them for nearly two centuries; and what happens here could well shake other Gulf states.

This report, put together in 24 hours or less in very difficult conditions,<sup>84</sup> conveyed a lot of information in two short minutes, while effectively engaging viewers in the human drama of a small, faraway country of which most of them probably knew nothing. On one level, therefore, a good example of BBC professionalism. But there was a crucial omission: no mention of sectarian divisions in the country<sup>85</sup> or its previous history of conflict. Obviously reporters cannot be expected to rehearse the entire history of a conflict each time they report on it. But this was probably the first time some viewers would have heard anything at all about Bahrain,<sup>86</sup> and only a handful are likely to have been aware of its demographic and political problems. If this had been the sum total of the BBC's reporting, the unease expressed by some executives, and some of the complaints made by the Bahraini authorities and their supporters, would be justified. Here was an incomplete account,

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<sup>84</sup> "We were physically prevented by government security personnel from approaching Pearl Roundabout on our second day of coverage; police with shotguns were on the streets, there were roadblocks everywhere and we had to use an ambulance as 'cover' to move around without being stopped. It wasn't a normal story where you turn up and have all sides represented..." Ian Pannell, telephone interview, 12 April 2012, and email 27 April 2012.

<sup>85</sup> "When we first arrived and spoke to protestors in Pearl Roundabout they were insistent theirs was not a sectarian movement. It was not until violence ensued and positions hardened that it appeared to increasingly take on a sectarian tone (which was actually in a very short space of time)." Ian Pannell, email to author, 27 April 2012.

<sup>86</sup> There had been only a very brief written report on the protests, read by the newsreader, on News at Ten the previous evening.

which showed no awareness of Bahrain's specific history and context, but saw the conflict there through the prism of revolts elsewhere in the region.<sup>87</sup>

But it was not the sum total. Already next morning the Today programme broadcast a very different view of events in Bahrain, in the form of an interview with David Mellor, a former British cabinet minister. He argued strongly that "the British government should be understanding of the problems of Bahrain", adding that "not all members of the Shiite opposition are moderate, they're trained in Iran", and recalling that that country had formerly claimed sovereignty over Bahrain. Mellor kept stressing that "Bahrain is a stalwart friend of Britain and the West" as well as "a liberal and tolerant quasi-democracy", in which the king had "gone out of his way to create quasi-parliamentary institutions in order to try and bridge the gulf between the Sunnis and the Shias". "There are key strategic interests here," he insisted, "which should be called into play before we all rush to judgement... You have to bear in mind that, with the Shia majority at 70% and quite a number of them influenced by Iran, it is not an easy situation either for the government of Bahrain or for the West. The last thing the West needs is a pro-Iranian government in Bahrain."

In the following days Pannell, and others reporting events first hand, continued to do so mainly from the protesters' perspective, but with more context and also short clips conveying the reaction of the authorities – for instance, on 17 February, a statement by Bahrain's foreign minister claiming that the crackdown was necessary because "the country was walking on the brink of a sectarian abyss", and adding that "the police took every care possible". Also that day, as the US and UK began to react to the crisis the BBC mobilised its diplomatic correspondent in London, Bridget Kendall, to give more background,<sup>88</sup> while Newsnight weighed in with a piece from its Economics Editor, Paul Mason – suggesting that the "roots of revolt" were "a mixture of economics and demographics" – and interviewed former British diplomats who warned that it would be "a huge mistake just to go for one-man-one-vote", since "there's a large majority of Shia. If you talk about democracy, you mean a Shia government."<sup>89</sup> (This view is not necessarily right, but it was important for viewers to be aware of it.)

On 18 February Pannell's report for News at Ten included footage of a pro-government demonstration, though participants in it were given somewhat short shrift: "across town it was the well-heeled supporters of the King who took to the streets... There's real wealth here, but much of it belongs to the Sunni minority who rule the country."<sup>90</sup> The poor here

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<sup>87</sup> On this point, Pannell himself says (telephone interview, 12 April 2012): "That was the prism through which the protesters were seeing the events – most important, rather than social media, was Al Jazeera Arabic – people were glued to the screen watching events that took place elsewhere – you can't underestimate the role that Egypt represented, and Mubarak – the feeling that a regime which looked as if it couldn't be moved *was* capable of becoming vulnerable. I'd like to think we've been doing the job long enough not to think every country's the same. But there *was* a wave. Egypt had the biggest impact on the rest of the region. The bond of fear was weakened if not broken."

<sup>88</sup> News at Ten, 17 and 19 February 2011. Kendall did stress that "with a Sunni royal family ruling a largely Shia population ... the West's big fear is a Shia uprising that could give Iran a foothold".

<sup>89</sup> Respectively Harold Walker and Sir Andrew Green, Newsnight, 17 February 2011.

<sup>90</sup> A slightly longer version of the report (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12500949>), presumably shown on BBC World and/or the 24-hour News Channel, does include a short interview with two people taking part in this demonstration. Unfortunately,

are overwhelmingly Shia Muslims. They're also the ones who are losing out." He now emphasized the economic roots of Shia grievance, and this was reinforced by an excellent report on Newsnight from Allan Little, who noted that "there's a reality here, that where there is poverty it's usually in a Shia neighbourhood"— although Humphrey Hawksley, on BBC World, took a different view: "This is a wealthy society – the anger is not about poverty but dignity and freedom."<sup>91</sup>

Pannell and his colleague Caroline Hawley (who arrived a day or two later after being diverted from Egypt) were experienced Middle East correspondents, but Hawley had never worked in Bahrain before,<sup>92</sup> while Pannell had not been there since 2006.<sup>93</sup> There was one BBC reporter with more experience in the country (apart from Frank Gardner, whose disability made it impractical to deploy him at short notice into a chaotic and potentially dangerous situation). Bill Law had been visiting Bahrain since 2007, reporting in some detail on political developments and especially the sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia. But he was employed by Radio 4's documentary series, *Crossing Continents*, which comes under Radio Current Affairs rather than Daily News, and therefore was not a TV news reporter.<sup>94</sup> Partly for this reason, he was not deployed to Bahrain during February or March of 2011, which was surely a missed opportunity. He did, however, file many pieces on the BBC website, several of which give so close and vivid an account of what was happening that on first reading them I assumed he was on the spot.<sup>95</sup> And on 22 March he did a very useful round-up for Newsnight, leading with an interview with one of the Shia activists released in February (a dual Bahraini-British national who had wisely taken the opportunity to return to London), but also giving due weight to the sectarian side of the story and mentioning that "across the Gulf are two huge Shia-dominated countries – Iraq and a possibly nuclear-armed Iran".

It would be wrong to suggest that Law's reporting gave a more sympathetic account of the government's actions, or that his narrative in any way resembled that of David Mellor or the retired British diplomats. On the contrary, if anything his knowledge of the

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this did not appear in the version shown on News at Ten. As Pannell himself says, "I hope that it is clear that unless 'output' allows sufficient time and latitude then some of the context and history risks being marginalised." (Email to author, 27 April 2012.)

<sup>91</sup> 18 February 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Email to author, 4 April 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Telephone interview, 12 April 2012. Pannell had visited Bahrain during a previous posting as Middle East correspondent (2005 to 2008), "for a story unrelated to the politics of it".

<sup>94</sup> "Bill doesn't work for me – he's a radio current affairs reporter principally." Jon Williams, telephone interview, 5 April 2012. Williams went on to explain that there are different skills involved: news journalists have to put together a "package" on the spot, while current affairs reporters can go to a place, gather material while they are there, and then put it together in a more analytical report when they come back. He added another reason, however: "We were not welcome in Bahrain [Jeremy Bowen had been refused a visa] – we went in on tourist visas. So we had to send people who were not necessarily known to the authorities. It would be surprising if they'd given him [Law] a visa."

<sup>95</sup> The importance of the website, both as a primary source of information and as a resource for those seeking a clearer and deeper understanding of events, should not be underestimated. Even so, it does seem unfortunate that news bulletins on radio and television did not benefit from Law's expertise.

background gave him a deeper empathy for Shia grievances. These come over very strongly in his account – perhaps all the more so because he is able to refer back to earlier episodes.<sup>96</sup> The point is that his background knowledge gave his reporting greater depth and authority.

Overall, the story continued to be set in an "Arab Spring" frame – "they hoped to copy Egypt's revolution, and this was what they got."<sup>97</sup> And from the start it had to compete for the lead in news bulletins with events in Libya. The two stories appeared for a moment to be developing in parallel, but soon sharply diverged and – for reasons summarised in the previous chapter – Libya emerged an easy victor in the struggle for media attention. Bahrain slipped into the background, and some of the reporters whom the BBC had withdrawn from Bahrain for security reasons (and was unable to replace)<sup>98</sup> – including Ian Pannell, and later Caroline Hawley – were redeployed to Libya. As early as 25 February Owen Bennett-Jones had to warn listeners to the Today programme that "it's easy to forget, with what's going on in Libya, that there is an attempted revolution going on in Bahrain"; after which Bahrain's foreign minister, interviewed by James Naughtie, clearly took comfort in stressing the difference between the two – portraying his own country as joining in the transformation of the Middle East "in an orderly manner", while "what's happening in Libya is really closer to a genocide than to a transformation".

After 20 February it was not until 14 March that Bahrain was again an item on News at Ten, which no longer had a reporter on the spot to cover the arrival across the causeway of 1,000 Saudi soldiers and 500 police from the United Arab Emirates. Instead it carried a report from diplomatic correspondent James Robbins (who had briefly visited Bahrain only a few days before the uprising, while accompanying Foreign Secretary William Hague on a three-day Middle East tour). On 15 and 16 March Caroline Hawley reappeared to cover the severe crackdown that followed. But she stayed only two or three days,<sup>99</sup> and by the 17<sup>th</sup> both the News at Six and News at Ten bulletins made do with a very brief voice-over report (leading with Foreign Office advice to Britons to leave the country) – although viewers of BBC World (and insomniacs in the UK watching the News Channel in the middle of the night) were treated to a Hardtalk interview with Jamal Fakhro (vice-chairman of the pro-government Shura Council) and a London-based opposition leader, Saeed Shehabi, whom the interviewer Stephen Sackur subjected to characteristically tough questioning. For its part the Today programme carried items on Bahrain on 15, 16, 17 and 18 March (when it too interviewed Mr Fakhro) and again on 5 April. But from 18 March Bahrain disappeared from the main TV news bulletins, forced out by NATO action in Libya and the aftermath of the Japanese tsunami. It was not to reappear until the arrival of Frank Gardner on 14 April.

Up to this point, then, BBC coverage of Bahrain is probably best described as uneven, and showed signs of improvisation by those responsible for deploying reporters – hardly avoidable as they scrambled to respond to the pressure of fast-moving events in different

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<sup>96</sup> Apart from an indirect reference in an interview with Shia women in Allan Little's 18 February Newsnight report, Law was the only reporter in the material surveyed by this review to mention – several times – the important fact that young Sunni activists took part in some of the February demonstrations, alongside their Shia compatriots. Unfortunately he did not publish or broadcast an actual interview with any of these, which would have strengthened the point.

<sup>97</sup> Ian Pannell, News at Ten, 17 February 2011.

<sup>98</sup> The BBC stresses that Pannell, in particular, was removed on security grounds.

<sup>99</sup> Her producer was subsequently detained and deported.

parts of the world. Several BBC reporters were on the spot in mid February, and again in mid March, but they did not include either of the two BBC journalists who had significant experience of Bahrain (Gardner and Law); and none was able to stay in the country for more than a very few days. Also, official accreditation for foreign journalists was not easy to obtain, and most if not all of the BBC reporters was working without it, which made it harder for them to cover the government side of the story.<sup>100</sup>

Although there were variations, a fairly consistent narrative was conveyed to the public: the Shia, a numerical majority with a deep sense of grievance justified by decades of discrimination and oppression, were now demanding their rights and being met with brutal and lethal violence. This was true as far as it went, and not seriously contested by any of the government's Western friends or apologists. To a large extent it was substantiated later in the year by a commission of inquiry appointed by the king himself and composed of eminent international human rights lawyers.<sup>101</sup>

But, that said, the Bahrain government was far from reacting in the single-mindedly ruthless manner adopted in the same days and weeks by Gaddafi in Libya, and later by Assad in Syria. In particular, between 19 February and 14 March the government appears to have made a good-faith effort to de-escalate the crisis. In the words of the same commission of inquiry,<sup>102</sup> it took a number of measures designed to placate public anger and engaged, through HRH the Crown Prince, in negotiations with groups from across the political spectrum in an attempt to reach a solution to the ongoing crisis. Among the measures undertaken by the GoB [Government of Bahrain] was granting protestors unfettered access to the GCC [Pearl] Roundabout, dismissing four Cabinet Ministers, pardoning large numbers of individuals convicted in political cases and allowing exiled political leaders to return to Bahrain. The GoB also allowed demonstrations and marches to be held throughout Bahrain and ensured that the Public Security Forces exercised considerable self-restraint and did not disperse these protests. No fatalities were recorded during the period from 18 February to 15 March 2011.

Unfortunately, the Crown Prince's attempt to reach a negotiated solution failed, and this period of relative restraint by the security forces was also characterized by

sectarian clashes, the disruption of classes in many schools as students participated in political marches, the violent clashes at the University of Bahrain, the attacks against expatriates, the blocking of major thoroughfares in Manama, the creation of "popular committees" and the setting up of checkpoints in many neighbourhoods to defend against vandals. By 12-13 March, the general state of law and order in Bahrain had significantly deteriorated.<sup>103</sup>

All these developments no doubt contributed to the government's decision to call for assistance from its partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (including Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar), to declare a state of emergency, and to resort to a much more thorough

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<sup>100</sup> Caroline Hawley (telephone interview, 21 February 2012). In emails to the author on 4 April she added: "Both times that I went, I was working without accreditation because journalists – some, at least – were being turned away... In terms of covering the government side of the story, the authorities did not always help themselves. One press conference was arranged after the official curfew had started."

<sup>101</sup> Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 23 November 2011, <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 663 (p. 167).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraphs 665-666.

crackdown on the opposition, in the course of which many further killings and other human rights violations occurred. It was therefore unfortunate that the period between 18 February and 15 March also coincided with a sharp drop in the BBC's attention to the crisis and the departure of its correspondents.<sup>104</sup> The BBC's audience, especially its domestic television audience,<sup>105</sup> was thus treated to two brief bursts of coverage at moments when the government was cracking down, but was told virtually nothing about what happened in the crucial three-week period in between. It was this, rather than any actual misrepresentations or inaccuracies, which made its coverage appear to some<sup>106</sup> "utterly one-sided".

### **Did BBC reporting change significantly after Frank Gardner's visit in mid-April?**

By the time Gardner arrived in Bahrain the repression was in full swing, and he certainly did not attempt to disguise or extenuate it. On the contrary, he was clearly shocked when shown marks of torture on the body of a man who had died in police custody, and was able to confront the health minister, who claimed that pictures of these marks had been "photo-shopped", by telling her he had seen the wounds with his own eyes. He did also, however, attend Friday prayers at a Sunni mosque and afterwards interview the imam, who asserted that the opposition were taking orders from Iran and that "if they manage to seize power, Sunnis will suffer";<sup>107</sup> and while reporting the checkpoints and curfew that the government had imposed he observed that most Sunnis and expatriates found these reassuring after the "chaos" of roadblocks previously thrown up by the protesters. Such touches are useful, in that they put more of a "human face" on the Sunni community and its fears than the rather tokenistic citations of ministerial statements or five-second clips of pro-government demonstrations that had featured in earlier reports. Gardner also noted that the opposition had "hesitated" when the Crown Prince offered them dialogue, thereby hinting that they at least shared responsibility for the current state of affairs. But his conclusion was hardly flattering or reassuring to the government:

This peaceful scene is deceptive. The regime's hardliners have got their security clampdown, the reformers have been sidelined and there's a pretence that things are going back to normal. For now the lid has been put back on the boiling pot. But the brutal way it's been done is like stoking fire beneath it.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, while Gardner added important nuance, he did not reverse the line taken in earlier reports. After his visit Today covered Bahrain on 22 April; Broadcasting House and The World This Weekend on 24 April; The World Tonight on 28 April; and Today's James Naughtie reported on a visit to Bahrain on 30 May. But the overall pattern of reporting in the year from April 2011 was not notably different from what had gone before. It continued to be sporadic, and generally triggered by outrage at human rights violations, with reports on these from the point of view of the victims, or their friends and families, being followed by an opportunity for the government to respond, which it

<sup>104</sup> The BBC says this was not done for editorial reasons: "In fact, we withdrew on security grounds and were unable to replace. Competing priorities were not the issue here."

<sup>105</sup> But even the excellent World Tonight programme on Radio 4, which has a specific remit to cover the international agenda, dropped the Bahrain story between 18 February and 14 March, being preoccupied with Libya and then the Japanese tsunami (which occurred on March 11).

<sup>106</sup> The complainants cited by Frank Gardner above.

<sup>107</sup> News at Ten, 14 April 2011.

<sup>108</sup> Newsnight, same date.

generally did rather lamely. There were brief flurries of coverage around the trial of the doctors from the Salmaniya hospital (charged with aiding and abetting the uprising) at the end of June; when the Independent Commission reported in November; and in February 2012 around the first anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising – marked once again by tear gas, rubber bullets and sound grenades. On this last occasion Bill Law *was* back in Bahrain, and did a characteristically thoughtful report for Newsnight,<sup>109</sup> in which, as well as rehearsing and updating the list of Shia grievances, he credited the king with genuine efforts to reform, interviewed one of the senior foreign police officers brought in to re-train the security services, and noted that the sermons of a leading Shia cleric were "ratcheting up the tension".<sup>110</sup> His sad conclusion was that "one year on, as the anger builds, time is running out for this tiny country sitting on a dangerous fault line".

Soon afterwards,<sup>111</sup> BBC Three screened a two-part documentary series, "Riots and Revolutions", which sought to make the Arab Spring real to the younger generation in Britain by sending Nel Hedayat, a 24-year-old presenter born in Afghanistan, to visit her contemporaries caught up in "revolutions" in four Arab countries. Bahrain was one of the chosen four, but not the best handled. Hedayat's host there was a doctor who had been imprisoned and (she claimed) tortured during the crackdown, but was now out on bail. Hedayat went with her to observe, if not take part in, a demonstration in a Shiite village, and experienced the effects of tear gas. The doctor's statements about the political situation were all accepted uncritically, and although the programme noted that "the government said it was acting in self defence and had urged protesters to exercise self restraint", no government spokesman or sympathizer was interviewed.<sup>112</sup>

Overall, however, there is no major shift in BBC coverage to be accounted for, whether for better or worse. What is mainly noticeable is that, apart from occasional bursts (of which the latest occurred before and during the Grand Prix on 22 April 2012), events in Bahrain were covered far less intensively than those in Libya, in spite of Britain's strategic interest in, and close connections with, Bahrain – points which, as we have seen, had been repeatedly emphasized at the beginning of the crisis. The most obvious reasons for this difference are (i) that events in Libya were so much more dramatic, and (ii) that the Bahraini royal family, clumsy and on occasion brutal though its reaction was, was simply no match for Colonel Gaddafi (or for the Assad dynasty in Syria) in the scale of atrocities it was able and willing to commit. To expect that Bahrain would receive *as much* coverage as Libya would be unrealistic and disproportionate. But the contrast was perhaps a little *too* sharp.

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<sup>109</sup> 14 February 2012.

<sup>110</sup> He also contributed a "From Our Own Correspondent" piece on Radio 4 later that week (18 February) which highlighted the precarious situation of Asian migrant workers in Bahrain, many of whom were the targets of Shia resentment.

<sup>111</sup> 2 March 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Clive Edwards, Executive Editor and Commissioning Editor for TV Current Affairs, says that given the official inquiry that detailed torture and repression, the Bahrain government's cancellation of an interview, the continuing protests and the worldwide condemnation of the regime he found it "hard to accept we were seriously unfair". He did accept, however, that it would have been better to give the audience more context and information to back up what was being shown and said on screen, the interviewees should have been challenged more, and there should have been a fuller explanation of the Bahrain government's position including the cancellation of the interview.

## 5. Syria

Syria had had a spring of its own – a "Damascus Spring" – in 2001, soon after Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as president. A number of discussion clubs or salons sprang up, in which Syrian intellectuals met and formulated demands for the restoration of basic freedoms after 40 years of emergency rule. They were tolerated for a while, then suppressed, and the leaders were given long jail sentences.

It has even been suggested<sup>113</sup> that this is where the "Arab Spring" takes its name from. But in 2011 Syria was one of the last Arab countries to join the movement. At the end of January President Assad was able to boast that "We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people."<sup>114</sup>

On 4 March, however, the BBC's Damascus correspondent, Lina Sinjab, filed a report for BBC World which suggested that government and people might not be quite so closely linked as the president thought. It included video footage, which she said had "made the rounds on YouTube", showing hundreds of people demonstrating the previous month in the old market in Damascus against a policeman's heavy-handed treatment of a market trader, shouting "thieves, thieves" and "Syrians shouldn't be humiliated" – an incident obviously reminiscent of the one that had sparked the uprising in Tunisia. She also reported that several people had been brutally beaten by the police when one of them violated the security instructions during a peaceful demonstration of sympathy with protests in Libya. These were among "signs that the wave of change in the Middle East is having an effect here". After finding a dentist willing to be named and quoted as saying "There is a wide gap between the government and people in Syria... To start with, we need better living conditions and fair distribution of the country's wealth," she went on to say: "Syria suffers from corruption that goes all the way up the system", and "many here believe that, without the rule of law, any change will be cosmetic"; though she prudently also noted that no one had turned up for a "day of rage" called by exiled opposition groups, and that

So far, there have been few calls for President Bashar al-Assad to step down. Although Syria faces similar problems as Egypt and Tunisia, the young president enjoys popularity here.<sup>115</sup>

On 15 March there was a second "day of rage", and this time hundreds did turn up to call for democracy, in Damascus and Aleppo. The following day about 150 people gathered near the Interior Ministry, demanding the release of political prisoners. At least 36 were arrested,<sup>116</sup> one of whom, the leading human rights activist Suhair Atassi, was dragged by her hair across two streets. Meanwhile the southern city of Deraa had been boiling over the arrest and torture of 15 schoolchildren who – influenced by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt – wrote the popular revolution slogan on the walls: "The people want the fall of the

<sup>113</sup> Chibli Mallat and others, "A Strategy for Syria Under International Law: How to End the Asad Dictatorship While Restoring Nonviolence to the Syrian Revolution", *Harvard International Law Journal*, March 2012, p. 146.

<sup>114</sup> Wall Street Journal, 31 January 2011.

<sup>115</sup> "Is there a revolutionary movement in Syria?", BBC World, 4 March 2011 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-12650062>)

<sup>116</sup> 19 March 2011, "Middle East unrest: Silence broken in Syria" By Lina Sinjab, BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12794882>.

regime". Deraa erupted on 18 March in what has generally been described as "a massive nonviolent rebellion",<sup>117</sup> and the Syrian uprising was born.

Over the months that followed, the world watched and listened with mounting horror as the death toll, carefully monitored by human rights organizations and the UN, crept up from the hundreds into the thousands. Every day, it seemed – but especially on Fridays – there were demonstrations in one or other Syrian city, and often in several at once. Almost invariably the security services reacted with lethal violence, including live ammunition, but also with brutal beatings, captured on mobile phones and flashed around the world. The BBC broadcast this "user-generated content" (UGC), generally taking care to specify that these were "images we can't verify",<sup>118</sup> or "unverified pictures posted on the internet by opposition activists",<sup>119</sup> although the sheer volume of this material gave it credibility and in many cases, as Beirut correspondent Jim Muir remarked,<sup>120</sup> "this footage is impossible to verify, but it would be hard to fake". Often, too, the footage included shots either of bodies returned to their families or of detainees who had been released, bearing clear marks of torture.

The reports were most often framed and delivered by correspondents outside Syria – in neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey), or in the studio in London – and this was regularly made clear with statements such as "foreign journalists are restricted from reporting freely within Syria",<sup>121</sup> or "international journalists are banned from Syria".<sup>122</sup> Indeed, visas and accreditation for visiting journalists were impossible to obtain for most of the period under review, although Lyse Doucet (regular presenter and foreign correspondent for BBC World Service Radio and BBC World TV) was allowed in in September,<sup>123</sup> and in January 2012, benefiting from a brief change in policy, Jeremy Bowen was given a five-day visa, then extended for a further five days, and was able to move around Damascus with a camera crew considerably more freely than he had done in Tripoli the previous year.<sup>124</sup>

In due course, the newsroom began to send BBC correspondents into Syria without government permission – first "taking the route that smugglers use" across the Turkish border,<sup>125</sup> then arranging undercover visits to Damascus and other large cities, where they accepted the hospitality and protection of opposition activists. Sue Lloyd Roberts did this twice for Newsnight, once in June (Damascus) and once in October (Homs). On 26 September News at Six and at Ten carried reports from Lyse Doucet who was "officially" in Damascus, while in between came a Panorama documentary by Jane Corbin, "Syria: Inside the Secret Revolution". Corbin did not herself cross into Syrian territory, but used amateur film from Deraa and other Syrian cities, skilfully intercut with interviews of activists and witnesses in neighbouring countries, including a Jordanian journalist who

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<sup>117</sup> Mallat et al., loc. cit.

<sup>118</sup> Adam Mynott, BBC One (6.30pm news bulletin), 25 April 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Owen Bennett-Jones, BBC One (6.15pm news bulletin), 2 July 2011.

<sup>120</sup> News at Ten, 30 October 2011.

<sup>121</sup> News at Six, 1 August 2011.

<sup>122</sup> News at Ten, 20 July 2011.

<sup>123</sup> News at Six, 26 September 2011.

<sup>124</sup> Interview, 3 February 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew Price, News at Ten, 17 June 2011.

had witnessed the early demonstrations in Deraa (and had briefly been arrested himself) and leaders of the then quite new "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) in Istanbul. Finally, between November 2011 and March 2012 Paul Wood made a series of clandestine visits to Homs, clearly running considerable risks.<sup>126</sup> These culminated in a dramatic Panorama documentary, "Homs: Journey into Hell", broadcast on BBC One on 12 March 2012.

Mention should also be made of the courage shown by Lina Sinjab, the BBC's resident correspondent in Damascus. As a Syrian national, she is clearly vulnerable to pressure from the regime,<sup>127</sup> and one might therefore expect her to be very cautious about reporting anything that reflected badly on it. But this has not been the case. One has only to scroll through her reports on the BBC News website<sup>128</sup> to find that, while always careful to report the government point of view and the existence of support for President Assad, she has faithfully and regularly reported the opposition point of view as well, including interviews with opposition figures, and – like her colleagues outside the country – has shown user-generated content of people being shot by the security services, etc. She reports that the opposition is disillusioned with the government's failure to keep its promises, and angered by the killing of unarmed protesters; even, on occasion, that many people hate Assad and want him to go.<sup>129</sup>

On 23 and 24 March 2011 she reported directly from Deraa,<sup>130</sup> but thereafter does seem to have been confined to Damascus. For two months after 19 April she was reporting from Yemen, but then returned to Syria and continued to file hard-hitting reports until mid-August. After that they became fewer and further between, but in March 2012 she was again filing frequent reports which pulled no punches. For instance, reporting on UN-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan's visit to Damascus she said, after summarising the government's position, "but on the ground the reality is completely different in their actions – their words are on one level and their actions are on a different level completely. That makes it difficult for the opposition to find any hope for a political solution, while the violence and the killing on a daily basis is continuing."<sup>131</sup> All in all she has given a splendid example of impartiality as well as courage, and it is a pity that her output from Syria has been largely confined to the website, BBC World, and sometimes the 24-hour News Channel.

<sup>126</sup> Two Western journalists, Marie Colvin of the Sunday Times and the French photographer Remi Ochlik, were killed in Homs on 22 February, when a government shell hit the "media centre" in which Wood and his cameraman Fred Scott had been staying until a few days before. Several others were wounded.

<sup>127</sup> Indeed, twice in the past year, Sinjab has been detained by the authorities, and she is now subject to a travel ban and unable to leave Syria.

<sup>128</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/search/news/?q=Lina%20Sinjab>.

<sup>129</sup> Today programme, 31 March 2011.

<sup>130</sup> This enabled President Assad's adviser, Dr Bouthaina Shaaban, to score a rare debating point against Today programme presenter Evan Davis, when he asked the almost ritual question "Why not allow the Western media in?" on 25 March. "The Western media is in," she replied. "The group of the BBC are in. They were reporting from Deraa... You ask the correspondents Assaf About [BBC Arabic correspondent] or Lina Sinjab of the BBC and tell them whether they were in Deraa or they were not. They were in Deraa and reporting from Deraa." ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9435000/9435786.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9435000/9435786.stm))

<sup>131</sup> 10 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17323093>.

As with other Arab "revolutions", the master narrative of the Syrian uprising as perceived from the outside world, especially in its early months, was straightforward: a "people" had suddenly lost its fear of a dictatorial regime and had poured out into the streets, peacefully and unarmed, to demand change. The fact that Syria was unquestionably a police state, and that it did react to the protest movement with extreme violence, made this narrative even more potent and hard to question than in other countries. So no doubt, in the West, did the fact that Syria's foreign policy under the Assads, father and son, was generally perceived as hostile to Western interests and values. Syrian intervention in Lebanon in the 1970s had perhaps been genuinely aimed at ending the civil war and protecting the Maronite Christian community. If so that was largely forgotten. Over the decades Syria had come to be seen as a ruthless occupying power in Lebanon (until driven out in 2005 by the massive popular reaction to the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri – yet another precursor of the Arab Spring), the sponsor of "terrorist" Hezbollah, the ally of revolutionary Iran and the implacable foe of Israel (though it had scrupulously respected the ceasefire on the Golan Heights since 1974).

It was therefore not surprising that in the early weeks many commentators – impressed by the unexpected volume of the protest movement and its tendency to snowball as each new demonstration of brutality by the regime led to a new wave of popular anger, as well as Assad's inability or unwillingness to woo the opposition with any meaningful change – concluded that he could not hold out for long but would soon be swept away by the torrent. But this has proved to be quite wrong. After over a year he is still hanging grimly on. His willingness to do so by force, and (key difference from Tunisia, Egypt and even Libya) the willingness of most of the army, police and paramilitaries to continue using force on his behalf, seem undiminished. Few commentators of any stripe now (May 2012) expect a rapid denouement.

As the stalemate became more entrenched and the crisis escalated in the autumn and winter of 2011, and especially after the death of Gaddafi brought an apparent resolution of the conflict in Libya, a kind of debate about Syria developed in the West. Policymakers found themselves obliged to explain why Syria was different from Libya, and the same kind of intervention was unthinkable. The main points were (i) that in Syria the army had not split (there were only individual defections) and therefore there was no rebel army holding significant areas of territory which an airborne intervention could help them secure; (ii) that Syria was placed firmly athwart all the regional fault-lines, so that any intervening power or powers would be likely to find themselves embroiled in conflict well beyond its borders; and (iii) that internally Syria was deeply divided on sectarian lines, so that any forcible overthrow of the Assad regime was likely to lead to bitter and prolonged sectarian conflict, similar to what had happened in Iraq.

These arguments were persuasive to most people. In just about every Western country there has been much handwringing and soul-searching about what can be done, but in none has there been a serious lobby in favour of military intervention. There have, however, been commentators – mainly on the left – who fear, or claim to fear, that the West, egged on by its allies in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and perhaps Turkey, is in the process of taking sides in a cataclysmic regional conflict between Sunni and Shia. If not, why encourage the Sunni king of Bahrain to hold out against the demands of his Shia subjects, while simultaneously cheering the efforts of the brave (largely Sunni) protesters in Syria against a regime whose main power base lies in the Shiite Alawi minority?

Once this perspective is adopted, the accusation that the Western media have been complicit in "framing" the conflict to bring about such an alignment follows almost inevitably. They stand accused of uncritically espousing the cause of the opposition in

Syria, and accepting its narrative of events, without inquiring into its credentials or acknowledging, let alone explaining, the fact that, for all its brutality, the Assad regime enjoys significant popular support.

Perhaps the high point of this critique was an article by Jonathan Steele in the Guardian on 17 January 2012, "Most Syrians back President Assad, but you'd never know from western media". Steele took the media to task for ignoring a poll conducted by YouGovSiraj for the Doha Debates (financed by a foundation in Qatar but chaired by former BBC journalist Tim Sebastian and broadcast by BBC World). The poll's main finding was that "some 55% of Syrians want Assad to stay, motivated by fear of civil war". Steele accused the Western media of ignoring this because "when coverage of an unfolding drama ceases to be fair and turns into a propaganda weapon, inconvenient facts get suppressed". He did not mention the BBC by name, but his criticism implicitly embraces it, since the BBC had not reported the poll.

Three days later Jeremy Bowen wrote a short and typically judicious piece on the BBC website, which may well have been intended as an answer to Steele, though he made no direct mention either of him or of this particular poll:

### Analysis



**Jeremy Bowen** BBC Middle East editor, Syria

How much support does President Bashar al-Assad have in Syria?

He used to have real legitimacy, based on promises of reform and opposition to the actions of Israel, the US and their Western allies. But after 10 months of bloodshed large numbers of Syrians want him out. They keep on demonstrating, and some have taken up arms, even with the certain knowledge that protest could cost them their lives.

The president carries on because he has a power base centred on his own Allawite community, a Shia Muslim sect that makes up 12-15% of the population. Most Christians - about 10% of the population - also seem to see him as their best bet for the future. And there are unknown numbers of others, including some from the Sunni community that dominates the protests, who believe it is Bashar, for better or for worse, or civil war.

In the end, it is guesswork because this is a country without credible opinion polls, elections or free speech.

What is certain is that the protesters are too strong for the regime to stop them, but too weak to bring it down. The stalemate cannot last indefinitely.<sup>132</sup>

Over a month later the BBC website published a News Magazine article dealing explicitly with the YouGov poll: "Do 55% of Syrians really want President Assad to stay?" by Charlotte McDonald. She did not directly defend the BBC's failure to report the poll, but pointed out that its results had been misleadingly summarised, since only people with access to the internet (which according to the UN is only 18% of the Syrian population) were polled, and there were only 98 respondents from Syria, which is far too small a sample to yield a statistically valid result.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>132</sup> 20 January 2012, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16646806>).

<sup>133</sup> 25 February 2012, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17155349>).

Poll or no poll, the following questions can legitimately be asked about the BBC's Syria coverage:

**I. Was the BBC slow to realize there could be no simple outcome to this conflict (on the model of Tunisia/Egypt), given the ethnic and sectarian divisions among the Syrian population?**

Here a distinction has to be drawn between radio and television. The main TV news bulletins at Six and at Ten, through the summer of 2011 and into the autumn, did not go much beyond reporting events on the ground – mainly the size of the protests, the courage and ingenuity of the activists and the brutal repression meted out to them by the regime. But from early on the radio programmes *Today* and *The World Tonight* – which straddle the dividing line between news and current affairs – did give a wider spread of opinion and analysis.<sup>134</sup> Besides representatives and sympathizers of the opposition, and official government spokespeople such as Bouthaina Shaaban or the Syrian ambassador in London, they interviewed London-based Syrians who were sceptical or hostile to the opposition, and independent experts with a wide variety of views.

An interesting example was Alastair Crooke, a former British intelligence agent and adviser to the European Union, who had been much involved in secret contacts and negotiations with Palestinian Islamist groups, notably Hamas.<sup>135</sup> In his view, based on telephone conversations with unnamed contacts in Damascus, it was unlikely that the regime would be forced out, and there were "huge disparities between what is reported on the outside and what is being said internally by the government and people on the ground there". The protests, he believed, were "driven mostly by Salafist groups, not at all interested in politics, armed and well financed, taking part in an insurgency", while "much of the narrative" was coming from exiles, "hoping to ride on the backs of this small group of insurgents, in order to provoke Western intervention". He disputed the figure of 62 civilian casualties reported from Deraa the previous day, claiming that in fact ten members of the security forces had been killed, and "only a handful of civilians". The majority of Syrians, he added, "quite clearly want reform" but "they do not want Syria to become a sectarian conflict":

They're very frightened of the sectarian element that is creeping into this, of one religion against another, one Islamic sect against another, and they're also very concerned, after what they've seen in Libya, that there will be an attempt to try and engineer a Western intervention. That may seem unlikely from the West, but it's a great fear among Syrians, who have seen this happen so quickly in Libya – that the West may see an opportunity at some point to intervene in Syria, weaken Assad and so make the situation possible for Assad to be politically weakened and eventually make peace with Israel, is the fear of many Syrians.

This account was certainly difficult to square with what BBC journalists had been reporting from other sources which appeared reliable, but it was surely important for Radio 4 listeners to be aware of it.

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<sup>134</sup> So did BBC World television – for instance devoting an hour and twenty minutes to live coverage of President Assad's speech on 10 January 2012, when he was expected to – but in the event did not – announce a new national unity government.

<sup>135</sup> Interviewed on the *Today* programme on 30 April 2011, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9471000/9471631.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9471000/9471631.stm).

## II. Did the BBC tell us enough about the components of the opposition, or what sort of alternative or successor regime might be expected if they succeeded in displacing Assad?

Here there does seem to be room for concern. Although BBC journalists spent a great deal of time with opposition activists, outside and later inside Syria, their reports focused overwhelmingly on what was happening on the ground – demonstrations, slogans, violent repression – but had relatively little to say about who the opposition leaders were or the ideologies likely to come to the fore if they were successful. The BBC website has carried many more reports about the Syrian National Council since its formation in October 2011 than any broadcast outlet. There have been some broadcast interviews with the Council's spokeswoman, Dr Bassma Kodmani,<sup>136</sup> but generally focusing on the immediate situation rather than long-term aims or perspectives. In January 2012 Paul Wood went to interview Dr Burhan Ghalioun, the Council's chairman, in his Paris apartment (he is a professor of political sociology at the University of Paris III), but only a two-minute segment of the interview was broadcast, and again it focused on the immediate tactical situation – whether the Arab League observers in Syria should stay or go.<sup>137</sup>

There has been little or no coverage, in the material we have seen and listened to, of specific ideological strands within the opposition, such as the Muslim Brotherhood – we have found no interview, for instance, with its secretary-general Mohammed Riad Al-Shaqfa.<sup>138</sup> Nor has the BBC informed its audience of the existence of exiled Syrian religious leaders such as the Sunni preacher Shaikh Adnan al-Aroor. Although presented by Saudi-owned al-Arabiya television as a man of peace,<sup>139</sup> he has interviews circulating on YouTube saying such things as

Whether they are Muslim, Druze, Alawite or Ismaili or devils or Arab, Turkmen or Kurd (no problem with Turkmen as 99.9% are decent and also the Kurds, no problem with them). The problem is that the regime has pulled some small minority of sects to its side. People are three kinds: those who stood by us, we will stand by them after the revolution; secondly, those who forget us, not with us or against us we will forget and ignore and will not deal with them. Third, those who confronted us, their punishment will be painful. As you know, Muslims form 85% or 86% of the population of Syria. If victory is achieved, the punishment will be severe and hard and especially I mention the Alawite sect, we will not touch any of them who stood neutral – those who rebelled, they will be treated like us as citizens but those who have aggressed against our sacred, By the great God they will be confronted, their punishment will be severe and harsh and we will mince them with mincing machines and feed their flesh to the dogs.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>136</sup> e.g. Hardtalk (BBC World and News Channel), 16-17 January 2012; Today (Radio 4), 10 March 2012.; Andrew Marr Show (BBC One), 11 March 2012; Jonathan Head, 1 April 2012, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17576145>).

<sup>137</sup> 5 January 2012: Syria opposition leader Burhan Ghalioun looks to future. (GMT, BBC World).

<sup>138</sup> He was interviewed in March 2012 by the Saudi-owned magazine Al-Majalla.

<sup>139</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/06/161116.html>.

<sup>140</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mGlqnYc9uI>><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mGlqnYc9uI>

Clearly the representativity and influence of such figures is not easy to establish. But there is no indication that the BBC, at least in its domestic outlets, is even aware of them – let alone that it has made any attempt to investigate their status.<sup>141</sup>

### III. Did the BBC initially underplay the involvement of armed elements and use of violence on the side of the opposition?

This is very difficult to answer because the facts are still in dispute. As already noted, the impression given in BBC reports up until the autumn of 2011 was one of an almost entirely non-violent protest movement being met by gratuitous force on the side of the regime. Only in the late summer or early autumn, with the formation of the FSA (composed of defectors from the regular army) did this begin to change. As Paul Wood put it in his Panorama programme of 12 March 2012, "almost from the beginning, it's been Syrian government propaganda that armed groups, or armed gangs as they're described, have been supporting the opposition. Now, after months of protesters being shot down in the streets, that myth has become reality."

This narrative has been disputed not only by the regime itself and people apparently sympathetic to it (such as Alastair Croke, quoted above) but also by some sources that appear more sympathetic to the opposition.

For instance, in February 2012 the Al Jazeera website carried an interview with Nir Rosen, an American journalist who had just come out of Syria after a two-month stay during which he "spent time with armed resistance groups in Homs, Idlib, Deraa, and Damascus suburbs". Here are some extracts:

***AJ: When did the armed struggle begin?***

**NR:** The first acts of armed self-defence or opposition in Syria took place by late April, especially after April 22 when Friday demonstrations throughout the country were met with live fire, causing many deaths. By the end of April, individuals in Homs' Bab Amr and Bab Sbaa neighbourhoods took up arms to defend themselves. At first they used shotguns and hunting rifles, along with rocks and improvised weapons. In Homs, the first armed group was established in Bab Sbaa in May. Likewise, the first accounts of armed resistance in Idlib, Deraa, Damascus and its suburbs date from late April.

***AJ: Who were the first to take up arms?***

**NR:** The armed phenomenon began in rural areas, known in Arabic as the *reef*, and in the working class urban *shaabi* areas. Men there were more likely to own

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<sup>141</sup> Asked about the absence of detailed coverage of the opposition, Jeremy Bowen replied (emails, 31 March 2012), "I think you're right as far as domestic TV bulletins are concerned. I've made a few suggestions but they've been swamped by other things." Bowen generously insisted on taking responsibility personally for this gap, and added; "I do think James Stephenson, editor of 6 and 10, would [be willing to] do something more in depth. I think the story has been much better covered on radio and on BBC World." In a further email on 23 April, Bowen added: "I've followed the exiled political opposition and talked about them in scripts, but I felt the lack of a bespoke piece filmed with them on the spot. There was also less urgency because of their disunity. They have not been a decisive political force." This seems a doubtful argument. The very fact that no one leader is able to control the opposition at this point surely makes it *more* important to identify a range of leaders who are listened to inside Syria, and to try and form a clearer idea of the likely political and ideological colour of any successor regime that an opposition victory might bring to power.

guns and were known as *qabaday* – "tough" men more likely to have the courage (and potential for violence) that one needs to respond violently to security forces. They had more grievances – and less to lose – than middle or upper class activists with university degrees.

**AJ: Who do the armed groups target?**

**NR:** From an early stage of the uprising, suspected informants for the regime have been intimidated, expelled and often killed. Executions of those suspected of spying for the regime take place regularly all throughout Syria, including in Damascus. By the summer there were regular ambushes of security officers on the roads, as well as attacks against *shabiha* ["thugs"], as the civilian paramilitary or militia forces of the security agencies are known.

**AJ: To what extent is the Syrian uprising a peaceful one?**

**NR:** The debate over whether or not it is peaceful is not based on empirical research but on propaganda from both sides. The pro-regime media wants to portray the revolutionaries as nothing more than armed criminals and terrorist gangs. In response, opposition supporters have, until recently, denied all violence – fetishising the notion of a peaceful revolution – which has hurt not only their credibility, but the credibility of foreign media which often uncritically report their accounts.

The debate is also largely irrelevant. On the ground it was clear that by the end of Ramadan (late August), that there was a growing consensus on the part of opposition supporters that only an armed struggle could overthrow the regime.<sup>142</sup>

By the time that this interview appeared, Paul Wood was one of several Western journalists also spending time with anti-regime fighters. In his Panorama programme on 12 March (already mentioned), he noted that "the gunmen here insist their role is solely to protect civilians, but there is no doubt that the conflict is escalating." He also showed video, taken by the FSA fighters, of Syrian army prisoners whom they said they had "executed for war crimes". As he went on to say, "This will worry Western governments, as they debate arming the rebels."

In an item he wrote for the BBC website on 12 February, "Syria's slide towards civil war",<sup>143</sup> Wood went further, recording that FSA fighters admitted to him that they routinely (though allegedly "after a hearing before a panel of FSA military judges") executed members of the pro-regime paramilitary force al-Shabiha ("the ghosts") who fell into their hands. (One of them justified this by showing Wood a film "taken from the mobile phone of a captured Shabiha", in which the Shabiha could be seen severing the heads of *their* prisoners, who "lay face down on the ground, hands tied behind their backs".)

So there is no dispute that, by February 2012 there were very much two sides involved in a desperate and violent, if unequal, conflict. But the chronology remains in doubt. It may be that in the early months the BBC missed the fact that the uprising already included an element of "armed struggle", as Nir Rosen's narrative suggests. If so, given the difficulty and danger of getting reporters to the places where the events were actually happening,

<sup>142</sup> 13 February 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/02/201221315020166516.html>.

<sup>143</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16984219>.

it is hard to blame them. Certainly in the more recent period they have made up for it. The reporting of Paul Wood and others since November 2011 has been outstanding.

## 6. Elsewhere, perhaps?<sup>144</sup>

### **Were certain conflicts or countries within the Arab world – and perhaps also the reactions of some countries outside it – not given due attention?**

There are 22 members of the League of Arab States. A phenomenon that affected only four or five of them would scarcely merit the name of "Arab Spring". And certainly at the beginning it seemed that many more than that were affected. Yet our Content Analysis notes (p.39, Table 19) that, on the days sampled, 73% of BBC Arab Spring news items concerned Libya or Egypt, while only 2% covered Yemen, and only 2.4% concerned either "other Mid East" or countries other than those three plus Bahrain, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, Iran and Iraq. Also (p.40, Table 20), Libya was the lead item in 266 news bulletins and Egypt in 100, while Yemen led only one and "other nation" and "other Mid East" only four between them. And the analysts comment: "While there was at least some coverage of Yemen, reporting of some other countries was notable largely by its absence: Saudi Arabia (4 items), Oman (0 items), Algeria (3 items), Morocco (5 items) and Jordan (0 items). (A brief review of coverage outside of our sample period suggests that reporting of these countries was very limited.)"

We have already noted the "Libya effect" as a reason why coverage of events in both Egypt and Bahrain was rather uneven, with attention falling away and correspondents being pulled out as soon as there was a lull between dramatic episodes. We also noted Jeremy Bowen's view (rejected by others within the BBC) that the Corporation might have put "too many eggs in the Libya basket". Even some of those who do not agree with this have a different but related concern:

Were we editorially still alert to what was going on elsewhere? Look at programmes other than the main news bulletins. In a 25-minute news bulletin it's hard to do. The point is, we do have other outlets with more space. Were *they* being curious enough about the rest of the Arab world at that time?<sup>145</sup>

It's a good question.

### **Tunisia**

Perhaps we should start with Tunisia, since that was where the "Arab Spring" started. Jeremy Bowen<sup>146</sup> feels that the BBC was "a bit late getting on to Tunisia", while both Kevin Bakhurst<sup>147</sup> and Andrew Roy<sup>148</sup> say they wish they had been there a week earlier – though Roy adds that "we were faster than anyone else".<sup>149</sup> As our Content Analysis notes (p.30), the Tunisian uprising in its early stages "was not deemed significant enough to be reported on"; and it was not until it reached its climax that the BBC's Adam Mynott

<sup>144</sup> With apologies to Amos Oz.

<sup>145</sup> Stephen Mitchell, telephone interview, 5 April 2012.

<sup>146</sup> Interview, 3 February 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Controller, BBC News Channel and Deputy Head, BBC Newsroom. Interviewed 20 February 2012.

<sup>148</sup> Head of News at BBC World News, interviewed 11 January 2012.

<sup>149</sup> The BBC was the only UK broadcaster in Tunisia before President Ben Ali fell.

arrived.<sup>150</sup> Christmas and the "big freeze" in the UK had apparently prevented the BBC from focusing sooner on a crisis in "one of the Arab world's least populous, and, arguably, less important nations".<sup>151</sup> It would no doubt have seemed far-fetched at that time to imagine that this crisis could be the beginning of a region-wide conflagration.

But it happened, and the "media circus"<sup>152</sup> swiftly moved on from Tunis to Cairo. One charge that has been laid against the media in general – notably by Roger Hardy, the BBC's former Middle East and Islamic Affairs Analyst – is that once President Ben Ali had been forced to flee they quickly "dropped" Tunisia, so that "when it came to the elections [in October] you had to really struggle to prepare yourself. Then they covered election day itself, in bite-sized packets. But what's happening in Tunisia now? It's hard to know if your main sources are in English. But Tunisia *matters*. It's the only real 'success story' of the Arab Spring so far."<sup>153</sup>

By contrast, Fran Unsworth,<sup>154</sup> Head of BBC Newsgathering, gives Tunisia as a positive example: "The BBC has not got a bad track record of going back – when Gaddafi was falling we were in Tunisia following up the elections... We look for the opportunity to follow up." She and her colleagues "look for pegs" for such follow-up stories, she says, and found one in the anniversary of the event now generally regarded as the beginning of the Arab Spring – the self-immolation of Tunisian street-vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010.

In fact that anniversary was marked only by a brief update from the BBC World correspondent in neighbouring Algeria, Chloe Arnold,<sup>155</sup> a collection of guest columns from Tunisian readers on the BBC website<sup>156</sup> and several more general pieces summing up the event's historic and regional significance.<sup>157</sup> But the following month, for the anniversary of President Ben Ali's departure, Middle East correspondent Wyre Davies did visit Tunisia and filed a series of reports: "Desperation of Tunisians who set themselves alight" (12

<sup>150</sup> From Our Own Correspondent, Radio 4, 20 January 2011.

<sup>151</sup> Wyre Davies, Middle East Correspondent, in Mair and Keeble, eds, *Mirage in the Desert?* (op cit), p.48. (Quoted in the Content Analysis, p.31.)

<sup>152</sup> Jeremy Bowen (interview, 3 February 2012), divides the "Arab Spring" story into three phases:

1. The symptoms emerging, becoming clear.
2. Acute phase when the eyes of the world are on it.
3. The circus leaves town deciding it's spent enough, and leaves a stringer, supplemented by occasional visits.

<sup>153</sup> Speech to seminar on "Covering the Arab Spring: Are The Media Getting It Wrong?" at the London School of Economics, 24 November 2011. A French-speaking specialist on North Africa, Francis Ghilès, intervened from the floor to claim that the situation in the French media is no better.

<sup>154</sup> Interview, 9 January 2012.

<sup>155</sup> 17 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16232585>.

<sup>156</sup> "Tunisia anniversary: Your experiences", 18 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16225720>.

<sup>157</sup> Mark Urban, Newsnight (BBC Two, 16 December 2011); Frank Gardner, Today (Radio 4) and Jon Donnison, News at Ten (BBC One), 17 December 2011.

January), "Unemployment in Tunisia remains a pressing issue" (13 January), "Tunisia revolution: One year on" (Today, Radio 4, 13 January), "Tunisia marks one year anniversary of revolution" (interview with Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the victorious Ennahda party, 14 January), "Economic 'winter' threatens Tunisia's spring" (BBC website Africa, 14 January) and "Tunisian Jews reject calls to leave" (30 January). Also, back in February 2011 Jim Muir had filed both radio and television reports on "How is Tunisia one month after revolution?"; and in July 2011, Jeremy Bowen had filed on "Has Tunisia changed six months on from revolution?", as part of the four-night television package on the Arab Spring referred to in the chapter on Egypt above.

Moreover, the coverage of the Tunisian elections on 23 October 2011 did last more than one day, and was not only in bite-sized packages. On 17 October there was a useful "Q&A" on the BBC website, and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> a diverse group of Tunisians were given the opportunity to "tell the BBC what the upcoming elections mean to them". From the 22<sup>nd</sup> to the 27<sup>th</sup> (when the results were announced) one of the BBC's most experienced reporters, Allan Little, was in the country, reporting almost every day. And a colleague, Pascale Harter, was also there, reporting for BBC World.

Of course one can always wish for more. But given the intense competition from neighbouring countries (the Tunisian election coincided with the proclamation of Libya's "liberation" after the death of Muammar Gaddafi) as well as from other parts of the world, to accuse the BBC of dropping Tunisia once Ben Ali had fallen would surely be going too far.

## Yemen

Somehow Yemen has never fully registered with the British public. In our audience research, it was not among the countries mentioned spontaneously as being part of the Arab Spring. The fact that part of it was under British rule until 1967 has been largely forgotten, perhaps because of the unglamorous, not to say traumatic, circumstances of Britain's withdrawal.<sup>158</sup>

It had, however, figured quite a lot in the news in the years before the Arab Spring – as a country in which Al-Qaeda had gained a foothold, and was able to train militants, including notably the young Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who became known as the "underwear bomber" after his failed attempt to blow up an aircraft over Detroit, using a bomb sewn into his underwear, on Christmas Day 2009. Even before this the US administration, well aware of the danger, had been giving substantial support to the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh (in power since 1978 and – like Mubarak – suspected of planning to hand over to one of his sons) in return for his cooperation against Al-Qaeda, as well as using drones to strike at known Al-Qaeda leaders, which in some cases caused significant civilian casualties. Yemen is the poorest Arab country, and ranked number 154 (out of 187) in the UN Development Programme's global Human Development Index for 2011. It was widely perceived as a failed or failing state, and parallels have been drawn both with Somalia – its southern neighbour across the Gulf of Aden – and with Afghanistan.

Not surprisingly, then, the BBC was quick to notice when on 27 January 2011, only two days into the build-up of mass protest in Tahrir Square, demonstrations of comparable size – tens of thousands – appeared in the streets of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, calling for President Saleh to leave office. Both BBC World's daily news roundups – GMT and The Hub – carried reports, as did World News Today, a programme which goes out on BBC

<sup>158</sup> "A Falklands moment it was not." – Brian Barron, "Return to Aden, Without Mad Mitch" (From Our Own Correspondent, Radio 4, 1 December 2007).

World but also reaches the domestic audience of BBC Four. Radio 4's *The World Tonight* – generally quick on its feet with foreign stories – carried an interview with the editor-in-chief of the *Yemen Post*, who had spent the day on the streets of Sana'a. But on *News at Ten* the events in Yemen rated only a brief mention in Jeremy Bowen's report from Cairo.

Thereafter, whether in terms of human casualties or political upheaval, Yemen definitely belongs in the "big league" of countries affected by the Arab Spring. Demonstrations involving tens of thousands of people in the capital Sana'a, and other major cities, continued throughout the year despite sometimes violent reaction by pro-government forces – notably on 18 March (the day after four journalists had been deported from the country), when 52 protesters were killed,<sup>159</sup> prompting a string of generals, tribal leaders, diplomats and ministers to resign or declare their public allegiance to the protesters. In late April, Saleh agreed to resign under a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, but then repeatedly avoided signing it. In parts of the country the "revolution" degenerated into tribal warfare, and on 3 June Saleh was wounded by an explosion in his presidential compound. He flew to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment, but returned unexpectedly over three months later, and was not finally persuaded to resign until late February 2012, after a presidential election in which his vice-president, Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, won 99.8% of the votes. During this time violence continued to spread in the country, with Al-Qaeda visibly expanding its grip in certain areas.

Yet BBC coverage was somewhat staccato. As noted above, only 2% of BBC Arab Spring news items on the days sampled by our Content Analysis covered Yemen, and only one item on Yemen was the lead in a news bulletin. These figures are the more striking in that the analysis "included a number of significant dates in the Yemen uprisings in our purposive sample and Yemen is a strategically important country for reasons of security" (p37). Moreover, the average length of BBC news items on Yemen was under 73 seconds (compared to 177 for Iraq and 167 for Libya (p.40, Table 21).

BBC Three screened an interesting documentary on 24 February 2011, "A Dangerous Place to Meet My Family", about a young British Muslim who travelled to Yemen in search of his roots, but this had been filmed in 2010. It dealt with economic and social problems in Yemen and the risk to foreigners from Al-Qaeda and related groups, but did not attempt to connect these issues with the political turmoil which had engulfed the country by the time it was shown. The *Today* programme focused on Yemen from time to time, often using reports from Damascus correspondent Lina Sinjab, who seems to have spent a significant part of 2011 in Sana'a, although between March and May she was sometimes not named for security reasons. Notably, on 24 April she was the only journalist from a UK news organization during the whole year-long stand-off in Sana'a to obtain an interview with President Saleh.<sup>160</sup>

On BBC Two, *Newsnight* carried a short report from London by Tim Whewell, followed by a studio discussion, on 21 March, and a strong on-the-spot report from Sana'a by Natalia

<sup>159</sup> There was an examination of the turmoil on the streets of Sana'a before and after this event in the film "The Reluctant Revolutionary", from the documentary department's Storyville strand on BBC Four. This included footage of the protest camp in the capital, snipers opening fire on protesters with live bullets, and the terrible chaos which ensued as the injured and dead were brought to a makeshift hospital. It gave remarkable insight into the events around that time but, being a documentary, was not shown until a year later, in March 2012.

<sup>160</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13181394>. A clip from this appeared on *News at Ten* that evening.

Antelava on 28 April (2011). Coverage on BBC World (GMT and The Hub) was also fairly consistent, but almost the only time Yemen got more than a mention on News at Ten was on 26 May, when the Foreign Office advised British nationals to pull out; and even then there was no coverage on News at Six. In total in 2011 the BBC carried only twelve TV news reports about Yemen, and only seven of these were focused solely on that country (the others being sections of broader surveys). This seems strange if one takes seriously the statement made by Today presenter Justin Webb, introducing a piece by Lina Sinjab on 30 March 2011: "What's going on in Yemen, the potential collapse of the nation, is of course of huge importance – you could argue huger importance than what happens in Libya, for us." Or indeed the ominous conclusion of a report by Hardtalk's Stephen Sackur on 24 January 2012: "The West has Yemen under constant surveillance. The fear is they'll be watching, powerless, as Al-Qaeda gains ground, and Yemen sinks deeper into chaos."<sup>161</sup>

In explaining the relative paucity of Yemen coverage, BBC executives referred to the dangers of working there, and the difficulty of access.<sup>162</sup> Undoubtedly these problems are real. BBC Arabic correspondent Abdullah Ghorab has been assaulted three times while working in Sana'a, by armed gangs apparently supporting the outgoing President,<sup>163</sup> and Stephen Sackur's visit in January 2012 had to be cut short because of kidnap threats.<sup>164</sup> But the BBC has not made the same degree of effort to overcome these problems in Yemen as it has in Syria – and this appears to reflect an underlying (perhaps not fully conscious) editorial judgement. As our Content Analysis says (pp.38-9), "The contrasting amounts of coverage of Yemen and some other countries is perhaps indicative that they may have been seen by editors and reporters in quite different ways and this is worthy of further examination." Executives and correspondents interviewed for this review argued, in essence, that Yemen was of far less strategic interest than Syria, and that the audience was not interested in its complexities.<sup>165</sup> This seems to some extent a self-fulfilling

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<sup>161</sup> Broadcast on both Radio 4 (Today programme) and BBC World television (as well as BBC News Channel at 00:30 & 04:30 GMT on 25 Jan).

<sup>162</sup> e.g. James Stephenson (interview, 7 February 2012); Jeremy Bowen (3 February 2012); Peter Horrocks (10 January 2012); Stephen Mitchell (6 February 2012).

<sup>163</sup> Ariel, 16 February 2012. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ariel/17063120>).

<sup>164</sup> Stephen Mitchell, interview 6 February 2012.

<sup>165</sup> For instance Peter Rippon, Editor of Newsnight: "There is a limit to the number of places we can do. You must resist the temptation to say we should do more of everything." (interview, 6 February 2012); Kevin Bakhurst, Controller, BBC News Channel and Deputy Head, BBC Newsroom: "Yemen is a fatal combination of a slow burning story while other more compelling things are happening around it." (interview 20 February 2012); Jon Williams, World News editor (after drawing attention to Sinjab's Saleh interview): "You have to face facts, we can only expect so much from the audience in terms of an appetite and I can only ask so much of the people who work for me in terms of commitment on those stories... I cannot pretend I sit here worrying about not giving Yemen the coverage it deserves." (interview, 24 November 2011; Williams later explained in an email, 23 April 2012, that he mainly meant he was not worried about his UK competitors.); Frank Gardner, Security Correspondent: "I think we've successfully explained to the small amount of our audience who are interested that it's the protesters who are irrelevant to the power struggle between two rival power centres – the Al-Ahmar versus Saleh's people: the Tent City people are marginalised." (interview 6 February 2012).

analysis. If Justin Webb and Stephen Sackur are right about the importance of what is happening in Yemen, one would expect the story to figure more prominently in BBC news and current affairs coverage.

## Algeria

If the success of the revolution in Tunisia could trigger upheavals in much larger countries to its east, it was natural to expect that it might do the same to its west, in Algeria and Morocco. Sure enough, as early as 9 January 2011 BBC World was reporting several days of violent protest over rising food prices in Algeria.<sup>166</sup> The BBC has a resident correspondent in Algiers, Chloe Arnold, and on 18 January the Today programme interviewed her, as well as Middle East Correspondent Jon Leyne, to ask "could what happened in Tunisia spread to other countries?" She reported "uneasy calm" in the streets, in spite of at least seven Algerian men setting themselves on fire in the last week in protest against unemployment and poor living conditions, apparently imitating Mohamed Bouazizi. She reminded listeners that Algeria was still emerging from two decades of violence – "what they call here *les années noires* or the black years, when Islamist militants fought government forces and hundreds of thousands lost their lives", but noted that demonstrations had already occurred at the New Year against rises in the price of sugar and cooking oil, and that more were planned.<sup>167</sup> The government had promptly restored the previous subsidised price of those commodities; but by 22 January the protests had turned political, with calls for change in the political system – reported by Chloe Arnold and Jack Izzard on BBC World.<sup>168</sup> On 12 February, the day after Mubarak's fall, the Today programme went back to Chloe Arnold, who described a massive police presence to prevent any celebrations in Algiers, adding that there were "fears for today about what will happen at this pro-democracy rally that's been planned".<sup>169</sup> In the event one must suppose that nothing happened, since thereafter Algeria all but disappears from mainstream bulletins for the rest of the year, apart from a few pieces on Gaddafi's family and one exemplary update report on the Today programme on 28 May by Kevin Connolly, essentially noting that the regime had so far been successful in containing demands for change without provoking major protests.<sup>170</sup>

## Morocco

In Morocco – a country which, with its Atlantic seaboard and strong national identity built around its Islamically sanctioned monarchy, had always kept itself a little apart from the rest of the Arab world – it took longer for popular stirrings in response to the Arab Spring to gain attention. On 20 February BBC World viewers learned, from a report by John Sudworth in Rabat, that thousands of people had taken part in peaceful rallies in Moroccan cities demanding political reform and limits on the powers of King Mohammed

<sup>166</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12148829> (misleadingly headlined "Demonstrators killed in Tunisia protests").

<sup>167</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9364000/9364883.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9364000/9364883.stm).

<sup>168</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12259350> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12260500>. These reports were probably also seen by domestic viewers on the 24-hour News Channel, but we have not been able to establish this for certain.

<sup>169</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9395000/9395560.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9395000/9395560.stm).

<sup>170</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9499000/9499440.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9499000/9499440.stm).

VI.<sup>171</sup> On the following day they learned, from the same reporter in Tangier, that in fact not all these rallies had been purely peaceful. In one city a bank had been set on fire and five people had died.<sup>172</sup> But two weeks later the king himself appeared on their screens (courtesy of Moroccan state television) to announce far-reaching reforms, which seem to have succeeded in defusing the crisis. It would appear that none of these developments were covered on BBC domestic news bulletins. Only a bomb attack on 28 April, killing at least eight people in a popular tourist café in Marrakech, attracted News at Ten's attention, with a report from security correspondent Gordon Corera making a grim sequel to the preparations for Britain's royal wedding, which led the programme. By the following night one British victim of the bomb had been named, ensuring that it rated a minimal voice-over item after the big event of the day, but the report from Caroline Hawley, sent out specially to cover the incident, featured only on BBC World and the News Channel earlier in the day, and only as audio, used as voice-over with pictures from the day before.<sup>173</sup> In a telephone interview (21 February 2012), Hawley confirmed that this had been a "quick in-and-out" visit, arranged when there were fears that a large number of Britons might have been killed. She had attended the funeral of the victims, but all her team needed to be back on other stories after the weekend, and therefore there was no time for any coverage of the political situation. Once again it was left to the Today programme to call in an academic expert, Dr Michael Willis, who was able succinctly to explain the political context – notably that Morocco was a "relaxed" country by Arab standards, where street demonstrations had long been tolerated, and since February they had acted as a stimulus to re-energize a reform process that had somewhat stalled in recent years.<sup>174</sup>

The Today programme was back in Morocco in late November, with a report from Aidan Lewis on why many of those who had taken part in the protests earlier in the year were now boycotting the elections<sup>175</sup> (which were won, as in Tunisia and Egypt, by a moderate Islamist party). Lewis also filed a useful piece for the BBC website on "Why has Morocco's king survived the Arab Spring?"<sup>176</sup> – a good question, and one that perhaps merited more investigation by a variety of BBC outlets. A partial answer was given in February 2012 by Simon Atkinson on BBC World's Middle East Business Report: part of the king's magic formula had been a trebling of food and fuel subsidies, but that of course came at an economic cost, and the country has a rising budget deficit.<sup>177</sup>

Clearly, events in Morocco provide an interesting foil to those elsewhere in the region – an example, perhaps, of what other Arab rulers might have achieved, and avoided, had they taken a similarly proactive approach to that of King Mohammed. At all events this seems an interesting and important question to explore.

## Jordan

<sup>171</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12519427>.

<sup>172</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12532951>.

<sup>173</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13241964>.

<sup>174</sup> 29 April 2011, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9470000/9470920.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9470000/9470920.stm).

<sup>175</sup> 24 November 2011, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9646000/9646634.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9646000/9646634.stm).

<sup>176</sup> 24 November 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15856989>

<sup>177</sup> 17/18 February 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17079274>.

A similar point can be made about Jordan. Like Algeria, or rather more so, Jordan attracted attention at the beginning of the Arab Spring, as one of the countries where there was a highly vocal protest movement, and it seemed a possible candidate for sweeping change. As early as 24 January 2011 Tim Whewell did a strong piece for Newsnight,<sup>178</sup> concluding: "The speed of events in Tunisia took everyone by surprise. Perhaps other Arab regimes are panicking too soon, but they know now that they can't take their citizens for granted." A week later (1 February), King Abdullah sacked his government and appointed a new prime minister, Marouf Bakhit, ordering him to carry out political reforms.<sup>179</sup> But after this BBC viewers and listeners were to be told very little about what was happening in Jordan. On 14 August the king's announcement of his support for limited reforms rated a two-minute report from London on BBC World,<sup>180</sup> but was not picked up or examined on mainstream domestic bulletins. After that there was a business report by Katy Watson on 21 September, which reached the unsurprising conclusion that "the unrest in this region is unprecedented: it's times like these that convincing investors of Jordan's stability seems a rather tall order."<sup>181</sup>

It would be really interesting to learn how stable or unstable Jordan actually is, and what are the political forces that might be threatening it.<sup>182</sup> Has King Abdullah, like his brother monarch in Morocco but with, on the face of it, a much less promising economic and geopolitical hand to play, proved more adept at defusing popular unrest than nominally republican leaders such as Ben Ali, Mubarak, Gaddafi or Assad? And if so, what is his recipe? Alas, such questions remain tantalisingly unasked, let alone answered.

## Saudi Arabia

All these questions pale into insignificance, however, beside the question of Saudi Arabia – the proverbial elephant in the Middle Eastern room. As our Content Analysis says (p.38): "Given the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia, its role as the key ally of the West in the region and its active role in both the Yemeni and Bahraini uprisings, it is notable that so little attention was paid to it."

The problem of covering this country is certainly not new, and BBC staff involved with the Middle East are all well aware of it. But it remains largely unsolved.

The problem is very simple. Everyone knows that Saudi Arabia, because of its vast oil reserves and production, is extremely important to the world economy. Its willingness and ability to keep the oil flowing into world markets is particularly important for Western interests – though also for those of other oil consumers – and therefore the continuation of the current regime is generally considered by Western strategists to be paramount among their policy objectives in the region. It follows that Western societies need as far as possible to know and understand the internal dynamics of the country, and ideally to be able to influence them. Government intelligence agencies of course do their best to

<sup>178</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9373045.stm>.

<sup>179</sup> Lyse Doucet, BBC World, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12339646>.

<sup>180</sup> Jonathan Josephs, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14525210>.

<sup>181</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-14987771>.

<sup>182</sup> Especially, perhaps, in the light of the current controversy about the proposed deportation from Britain to Jordan of the terrorist suspect Abu Qatada, and the issue of how seriously undertakings from the Jordanian government in that connection can be taken.

compile such knowledge and understanding, but most would agree that this is also an important part of the news media's job.

Obviously, the Saudi regime itself shares Western interest in its own stability, but it does not see that objective as being served by detailed Western knowledge of its own society and internal workings, and especially not knowledge by the Western media and public. It prefers to manage the affairs of its country in its own way, without foreign interference and without prying eyes. And it certainly has no interest in being held publicly to account by Western standards of morality. Therefore it does not permit correspondents of Western or international media organizations to reside on its soil, and it is extremely cautious about issuing them with even temporary visas – most often preferring to invite them as guests, and to do so when they accompany visiting political leaders (the role of a journalist as recorder and disseminator of official statements being perhaps the only point of overlap between its own understanding of the profession and that prevalent in the West).

There are partial exceptions to these rules – Saudi Arabia being a society based above all on personal relationships, many of whose elite spend a significant part of their time in the West, and have friends there. Many Western journalists have become adroit at finding loopholes, and securing visas at least for short stays in the Kingdom. But such concessions are never unconditional. There is always at least a tacit understanding that certain taboos will be observed, and few journalists want to jeopardise their chances of being allowed to come back. That also applies to relations with other regimes in the region, but Saudi Arabia is where the arrangements are most constricting, and also where they matter most.

All of this has been broadly true since the 1970s, if not earlier. Most Western journalists find it very frustrating, but feel there is little they can do about it. The Arab Spring simply poses the old problem in a new and more acute form. If the whole established order of the region is tottering, must that not apply to Saudi Arabia too? At least, is it not very important to know whether it does or not, and if so how? Of course it is. But how do you go about it? As Fran Unsworth, Head of BBC Newsgathering puts it,<sup>183</sup>

The Saudis won't invite us to come in and report the fall of the regime. So we have to make sure we have enough people who are following events there from the region or from London – tracking it.

Given such difficulties, the BBC may be considered to have done well in getting five correspondents into Saudi Arabia at different times in 2011: BBC World's Middle East business reporter Philip Hampsheir in February; Middle East correspondent Paul Wood, and Sue Lloyd Roberts from BBC Two's Newsnight, in March; Michael Buchanan of Radio 4's World at One and PM programmes in May; and Edward Stourton – a special reporter and former presenter from Radio 4's Today programme – in October.

Hampsheir was off to a timely start, being able to report from Riyadh on 6 February that despite its oil wealth Saudi Arabia faced some of the same economic and social problems that had caused political turmoil in Egypt and Tunisia – notably rising food prices – but also that Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours, unlike poorer Arab countries, had fiscal surpluses that would allow them to "cushion" their populations against these hardships.<sup>184</sup> A month later, Paul Wood reported for News at Ten on demonstrations in Saudi Arabia's eastern province, doubly sensitive because it is not only where most of the oil is located but also home to the country's sizeable – and disaffected – Shia minority. Wood was

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<sup>183</sup> Interview, 9 January 2012.

<sup>184</sup> 6 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12367624>.

careful to draw attention to his government "minders" and the restrictions on reporting, and the actual footage shown of the protests was user-generated ("pictures from YouTube").<sup>185</sup>

Unfortunately his visit was very short, but the baton was taken up by Sue Lloyd Roberts, who achieved something of a scoop by being on the spot for a pre-advertised "day of rage" in Riyadh, for which 30,000 supporters had signed up on Facebook. After abundant warnings that demonstrations were illegal and that the law would be strictly enforced, the authorities were so confident that no one would turn up that they actually took Lloyd Roberts to the appointed venue. In fact one person, a teacher named Khaled el Johani, did arrive and gave her a hard-hitting interview, in which he said he was not afraid of going to jail because "the whole country is a jail". Police followed him when he drove off and, ominously, when she tried to call him that evening at the number he had left her there was no answer. But her report was not confined to this one-man revolution. She also interviewed a loyalist tribal leader; the family of an imprisoned Shiite leader in the eastern province; "one of the few opposition spokesmen not in jail" in Riyadh; young men on the Red Sea coast who expressed support for the king; and a woman in a poor district whose "husband is out of work, there's a hole in the roof, and she has to beg for baby-milk and nappies" – but the social worker who introduced her said that "the government is doing the best they can".<sup>186</sup> This was followed by a further report focusing specifically on the situation of women in the Kingdom.<sup>187</sup>

Neither Buchanan nor Stourton were so lucky in their timing, although Buchanan was able to report Saudi reactions to the death of Osama Bin Laden,<sup>188</sup> and Stourton to report from the Kingdom on the significance of the death of Crown Prince Sultan.<sup>189</sup> Otherwise, developments in Saudi Arabia had to be analysed from the studio in London – the most important, perhaps, being the king's announcement that he would appoint women to the Shura Council (the nearest thing Saudi Arabia has to a parliament) and allow them both to vote and run in the next municipal elections, due in four years' time.<sup>190</sup> There were also several pieces devoted to the vexed question of Saudi women's right to drive cars – an issue which one expert interviewed on Today<sup>191</sup> complained was distracting attention from "the more serious political issues". One of these, perhaps, was a new draft anti-terrorism law, of which Amnesty International obtained a copy and published it in July. Its possible impact on political activists was analysed by Frank Gardner,<sup>192</sup> who returned to the same issues in December when Amnesty published its own damning report on Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Spring within its borders – cracking down on protesters and

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<sup>185</sup> 10 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12708487>.

<sup>186</sup> 11 March 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9424081.stm>

<sup>187</sup> 28 March 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9436522.stm>.

<sup>188</sup> World At One, 16 May 2011.

<sup>189</sup> Today, 24 October 2011.

<sup>190</sup> BBC World, The Hub, 17 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13814514>; Emily Buchanan, 25 September 2011 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15055570>); Today (Radio 4), interview with Dr Maha Azzam of Chatham House, 26 September 2011; discussion with former British ambassador Sir Andrew Green and Khaled Al Maena, editor of the Arab News, 1 October 2011.

<sup>191</sup> Professor Madawi Al Rasheed of King's College London, 17 June 2011.

<sup>192</sup> Today, 22 July 2011.

reformists in the name of security, and arresting hundreds of people for demanding political and social reforms or calling for the release of relatives detained without trial. Gardner noted that Saudi Arabia had so far resisted the wave of change in the Arab world by pumping billions of dollars into the religious and security establishments, and that unrest had been largely confined to the Shia minority in the east of the country.<sup>193</sup> Meanwhile, on 26 July Hardtalk had carried a rare interview with Princess Basma Bint Saud bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, a member of the royal family, who said she was trying to shine a light on the "missing link" between the king's promises and their implementation. She described the decision to send Saudi troops into Bahrain as a "faux pas", and asserted that they had now been withdrawn.<sup>194</sup>

Could the BBC have done more? It is striking that even when Foreign Secretary William Hague visited Saudi Arabia in early July 2011, the visit was scarcely mentioned on BBC news bulletins, and Stephen Sackur, interviewing him on Hardtalk on his return, focused on the situation in Libya rather than on Saudi Arabia itself or Saudi-British relations.<sup>195</sup>

Hugh Miles, an award-winning freelance journalist who follows the affairs of the Kingdom closely, points out that neither of the most influential Saudi opposition figures – Saad al Fagih and Mohammed Al Masary – has been interviewed on the BBC.<sup>196</sup> He also suggests that the BBC could devote more attention to such issues as corruption, the crime rate, a growing difference between rich and poor, poor public services and numerous royal family scandals (some of them revealed by the anonymous Twitter user Mujatidd) – issues which surely merit as much coverage as women's right to drive, if not more.<sup>197</sup>

According to Miles:<sup>198</sup>

leaving aside the Eastern Province, what's actually been happening on the ground inside Riyadh and other major cities in the last 12 months has been limited. There have been some vigils in Riyadh and a few arrests in Riyadh and Jeddah. There were one or two statements from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. But nothing like other Arab countries, nor the Eastern Province.

This is basically accountable to a lack of experience regarding civil action, the fact that the ulama have issued fatwas against it and a wall of fear with regard to the secret police. Also the distribution of largesse...oil money and religion are pretty strong suppressants.

The Coalition of the Free Youth [CFY] consisting of 13 Sunni groups is behind much of the subversive political activity going on now.

Opposition in the Kingdom is sectarian and tribal. Sunni opposition groups operate separately from Shia ones, and any revolution is going to look more like Iraq than Egypt.

<sup>193</sup> World News Today (BBC World and BBC Four), 1 December 2011.

<sup>194</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/hardtalk/9549685.stm>.

<sup>195</sup> William Hague: "Time is against Gaddafi", HARDtalk 7-8 July 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/hardtalk/9532641.stm>.

<sup>196</sup> Certainly this review has not been able to find any interview with them, or indeed reference to them.

<sup>197</sup> Email to author, 25 February 2012.

<sup>198</sup> Email to author, 28 February 2012.

In order to distance themselves completely from the Shia, last year the CFY called for a gathering in front of the Iranian Embassy in support of the Arabs in Iran. This was a clever move as even though they knew in advance that nobody would come it successfully distanced them from the Shia.

The CFY have been trying to use vigils for relatives of political prisoners (with whom there is wide public sympathy) as a springboard for their reform agenda. They have also been trying to rally the unemployed.

The mothers and wives of political prisoners have long been petitioning the Ministry of the Interior and demonstrating in small numbers, with no organized social movement behind them.

So CFY have organized several vigils after Friday prayers at mosques in big cities around the country.

Late last year activists tried a new tactic. Working together with relatives of political prisoners they adopted the *Abwab al Maftuha* [Open Doors] system to lodge their complaints with Prince Nayef [the new Crown Prince]. *Abwab al Maftuha* is the Saudi version of an MP's surgery.

The idea was that by using a procedure which the regime is proud of they would show that they were not revolutionaries, just asking for something nobody would disagree with.

They thought this would put the regime in a trap, as since most political prisoners have refused to sign an undertaking confirming they will stop what they are doing, freeing them would be viewed almost like a permission for them to go ahead with more civil disobedience. This, they hoped, would snowball and so the wall of fear would be broken as seen elsewhere in the region.

The prisoners' relatives started the *Abwab al Maftuha* process with a few dozen people. They weren't received warmly but weren't rejected either, so were encouraged and went again the following week in bigger numbers. The second week, they were intimidated but not expelled forcefully, so the third week they decided to go in even bigger numbers and they made an announcement beforehand to make publicity. But this time the regime dealt with them almost like a demonstration, arrested them, questioned them and some are still in jail now. Women were reportedly subjected to abuse before being released.

Since then not much more has happened in terms of demonstrations. Frenetic media activity continues, especially on Twitter, which has grown exponentially in Saudi Arabia in the last year. Several TV channels have also been hyping up reform, with some contributions from inside the country.

While I am not in a position to verify the above statements, Mr Miles is a generally respected author and commentator, and an occasional contributor to the BBC.<sup>199</sup> Reading his comments on Saudi Arabia (his main field of study), one has the feeling of reading about a three-dimensional country in which real people live. The BBC does, from time to time, give us glimpses of such a country – the two *Newsnight* reports by Sue Lloyd Roberts mentioned above are a particularly good example. But such tasters leave one hungry for more.

<sup>199</sup> See, for instance, 1 October 2011: "Al-Jazeera boss steps down: strains with Qatar royals?" By Hugh Miles, Cairo. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15129440>.

People within the BBC are acutely conscious of this. "We haven't really got into it at all," says Jeremy Bowen.<sup>200</sup> And Clive Edwards, Executive Editor and Commissioning Editor, TV Current Affairs, hopes to do something about it. "As it happens," he told us, "the series I want to do next is a three-parter looking at the three big regional powers – Israel/Iran/Saudi – in the light of the Arab Spring. John Ware for Israel; Lyse Doucet for Iran and Frank Gardner for Saudi."<sup>201</sup> That sounds promising. A country like Saudi Arabia is never going to be adequately covered by reacting to such little "breaking news" as there is. But a careful investigative documentary, adequately resourced and written and presented by a senior BBC correspondent with extensive experience of the region, should really have something to offer.

### **Iraq, Israel, the Palestinians?**

In the speech referred to above,<sup>202</sup> Roger Hardy laid two further charges against the media. One, which he described as "a failure of staying power", was that "Iraq has dropped out for more than a year, because the caravan has moved on". The other was that one of the "framing myths" of the media narrative of the "Arab Spring" was that "Palestine no longer mattered".

This review has not had the resources to check these points in any systematic way. It is surely true that Iraq has had less airtime on the BBC, relative to other Arab countries, since the Arab Spring began. But it is hard to see how this could have been otherwise, even though bloodshed there continued, the last British troops left in May, and the end of the year was marked by the official end of the war and the departure of American combat troops. In relative terms, increased coverage in one place inevitably means a decline somewhere else; and although there were anti-government demonstrations in both northern and southern Iraq in the early months of 2011, no sustained mass movement comparable to those in countries further west occurred. We were intrigued, however, to learn that Baghdad had been chosen as the testing ground for a new formula of BBC newsgathering in the region, with a bilingual correspondent servicing both the Arabic and English-language services,<sup>203</sup> and look forward to seeing how this works out.

The notion that "Palestine no longer mattered" might at first sight seem to be corroborated by a "From Our Own Correspondent" piece which Jeremy Bowen filed for Radio in August 2011:<sup>204</sup>

My passports say it all. Like most foreign correspondents in the Middle East I have two – one for Israel, the other for Arab countries. That's because some Arab states will not let you in if you have an Israeli visa. My passport with the Israeli stamps shows that for almost six years until last December, I was in Jerusalem about once a month. Then nothing – until a quick visit last week. This year, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been sidelined. As for the other passport – since January, when the revolutions began, I have almost filled a new one, jumbo size, with Arab stamps.

The BBC's Head of Newsgathering, Fran Unsworth, also feels that

<sup>200</sup> Interview, 3 February 2012.

<sup>201</sup> Interview, 14 February 2012.

<sup>202</sup> At the London School of Economics, 24 November 2011.

<sup>203</sup> Jon Williams, interview, 24 November 2011. The correspondent is now in place. (Peter Horrocks, email to author, 25 April 2012.)

<sup>204</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/9573523.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/9573523.stm)

The Israeli/Palestinian question has been squeezed – not that there were that many news events around that time. We could have done more to reflect how that story underpins so much of the politics of the region (certainly in Egypt – Mubarak's survival was quite entwined with it).<sup>205</sup>

Be that as it may, even a cursory search of the BBC website quickly shows that neither Israel nor the Palestinians disappeared from the coverage in 2011. Many reports covered the reactions of both Palestinians and Israelis to the Arab Spring, while others followed the specific events of the conflict between them, such as the prisoner exchange involving Corporal Gilad Shalit, and the Palestinian effort to secure membership of the United Nations. There is only one major event which the BBC was slow to take notice of, and ironically that is what some have called the "Israeli Spring", when large numbers of Israelis camped out in all the country's major cities to protest against living conditions and particularly the lack of affordable housing. This movement began in mid July, and by the 23<sup>rd</sup> tens of thousands of people were occupying the centre of Tel Aviv.<sup>206</sup> Yet it was not until 26 July that the BBC referred to these protests (in a story on the website about Prime Minister Netanyahu's response), and not until 2 August that it carried a more focused piece by Kevin Connolly, "Israel suffers summer of economic discontent".<sup>207</sup> This suggests, not that the BBC had turned its gaze away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but perhaps that the prism of that conflict is so powerful that it renders events in Israel not directly related to it harder to spot.

To conclude, I cannot give a definite answer to Stephen Mitchell's question posed at the beginning of this chapter: were "outlets with more space" than the main TV news bulletins "being curious enough about the rest of the Arab world" while the attention and resources of those bulletins were concentrated on Libya? The BBC's output is wide and various, and we have not had the resources to survey all of it. Of the "also rans", Tunisia and the Palestinians appear to have been the best covered, and Radio 4's Today programme appears to be the outlet that came nearest to fulfilling the mission Mitchell assigns to it. But overall, there was room for these outlets to be *more* curious, and the curiosity of the audience about a number of Arab countries may have been left unsatisfied. Important and dramatic as the Libya story was, the overwhelming attention it received does seem to have been at the expense of at least some other countries in the region.

## Rest of the World

One other issue of geographical balance remains to be assessed. **How balanced and informative was the BBC's coverage of world reaction to the "Arab Spring"?**

Here our Content Analysis, for the days that it covers, tells a very clear story. If we look at Table 35 on page 52, we find that no less than 88% of the "international 'national' actors" – i.e. people identified as coming from or representing countries outside the Middle East – mentioned in the sample of BBC news items came from the UK, the US and France. If Italy and Germany are added, that figure rises to 94.2%. Russia accounts for only 2%, China for 0.5%, and the rest of the world combined for only 3.3. It is true that reporting of Russian actors does increase over time (Table 37, p.54), but only from zero in Phase 1 (19 Dec 2010 – 14 Jan 2011) to 0.3% in "Phase 2, wave 1" (25 Jan – 15 May 2011), 5.1% in Phase 2, wave 2 (30 July – 21 October 2011), and 6.9% in Phase 3 (22 Nov 2011

<sup>205</sup> Email to author, 23 April 2012.

<sup>206</sup> See Wikipedia, Timeline of the 2011 Israeli social justice protests, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_the\\_2011\\_Israeli\\_housing\\_protests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_2011_Israeli_housing_protests).

<sup>207</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14344515>

– 25 Jan 2012); while Chinese actors, starting at 0.6% in Phase 2, wave 1, disappear again completely in Phase 2, wave 2, and reach 1.4% in Phase 3. By contrast, actors from the UK, USA and France appear consistently from the first wave of the second phase.<sup>208</sup>

Similarly, Table 36 on page 53 – which captures international "responses" to events in the Arab Spring, reported in the same sample – shows that Russian responses formed only 0.8% of the total, while Chinese responses were scarcely reported at all.

Now, obviously it would be ridiculous to suggest that the BBC should give equal coverage to each of the 193 member states of the United Nations, or even coverage proportionate to their population, regardless of context. It is to be expected, and quite reasonable, that it would pay particular attention to the role of the United Kingdom in international affairs, to that of the United States (which is still the world's leading military power and the one most given to projecting power, both hard and soft, in other parts of the world), and to that of Britain's partners in the European Union – especially perhaps France, which like Britain has a history of involvement in the Arab world stretching back for a century and more. But it is by now generally accepted that we live in a "multipolar" world, in which new powers are emerging; and that in matters of international peace and security an important role is played by the UN Security Council, especially its veto-wielding permanent members. Besides the US, UK and France, these include Russia and China. Perhaps the willingness of those two powers to abstain on Resolution 1973, authorising military action (short of deploying ground troops) to protect civilians in Libya, was taken by some Western policymakers as meaning that they could be relied on to continue accepting Western leadership in making international policy towards the Middle East, especially if the support of the Arab League could be secured. If so, it was a grave mistake, as their reaction to later Western and Arab initiatives on Syria has shown; and the BBC may have made a similar misjudgement. Judging from the coverage examined in the Content Analysis, it did little to investigate, or to inform its audience about, the reaction of other world powers to Western policies in the Middle East, or the opinions and processes that determine the foreign policy of those other powers.

Admittedly, as BBC executives reminded us, reflecting the position of people who don't want to talk to you can be challenging.<sup>209</sup> Foreign policymaking in Moscow and Beijing is not the most transparent of processes. But it is certainly more so than it was in the past. People like Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the international affairs committee of the Russian Duma,<sup>210</sup> could have been interviewed more often, and more widely; and the expertise of resident BBC correspondents such as Steve Rosenberg in Moscow – interviewed on BBC World's GMT programme about Russia's relations with Syria on 16 December 2011 – could have been mobilised much earlier, and for the benefit of domestic as well as global audiences. Surely the BBC should have asked its correspondents in both Moscow and Beijing – and perhaps also in Brasilia, New Delhi and Pretoria – to file some

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<sup>208</sup> For explanation of the different phases of coverage, see above, p.25, note 32.

<sup>209</sup> "On Syria – how easy is it for us to reflect and explain the Chinese position? We've tried, but the Chinese government doesn't do sit down interviews with us like William Hague does. We don't get parity of access. We did a bit and what we could on the different diplomatic positions around Libya – it's not that we don't think they matter but it can be difficult in production and storytelling terms when key people won't talk to you. We have to find other ways to do it." Mary Hockaday, Head of Newsroom, email to author, 23 April 2011.

<sup>210</sup> Today programme, 5 August 2012, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9556000/9556697.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9556000/9556697.stm).

analytical reports on reactions to the Arab Spring, and to other powers' involvement in it, at a much earlier stage.

## 7. Matters arising

In this concluding chapter I will discuss some more general issues about broadcasting which arose during coverage of the Arab Spring, and will continue to be relevant in the post Arab Spring era, as the impact of the radical transformation in communications we have witnessed within and beyond the Arab world continues to work itself out.

### i. Context and background

#### **Could the BBC have covered events in the region *before* 2011 better, enabling the audience to have a clearer understanding of the upheavals when they occurred?**

Yes. Although the period before December 2010 is not covered by this review as such, self-criticism along these lines was volunteered to us by a number of executives and correspondents – in itself reflecting an admirable culture of internal questioning and search for improvement:

- Clive Edwards, Executive Editor and Commissioning Editor of TV Current Affairs, asks himself, in the light of the Wikileaks revelations about how US diplomats viewed Arab regimes, like that of Mubarak, which their governments were heavily supporting: "should we have been more perspicacious about that? No western governments cottoned on to what was happening. They carried on supporting dictators and strong men. Could we have spotted this? In an ideal world, yes. We should be interrogating the premises, looking at whether those kinds of mistakes were being made."<sup>211</sup>
- Kevin Bakhurst, who runs the 24-hour News Channel, agrees that he wishes the BBC had done more on the region before 2011: "Yes, absolutely. We could have done other things. Did we explore enough Gaddafi's relationship with the west? No."<sup>212</sup>
- And Stephen Mitchell, Deputy Director and Head of Programmes, BBC News, says: It's probably a fair criticism to say that in Network News we were *not* sophisticated enough in looking at the Arab world and seeing that there are a whole range of different Arab opinions, etc. We did capture some of that, but were we rigorous enough? With hindsight probably not, because clearly we were transfixed with what was a very complicated story [sc. the Arab-Israel conflict]. The Middle East always involves history and current affairs. We saw what was going on in different countries in different ways – but probably could have done more to highlight it for our audience.<sup>213</sup>

I will ask further on – in the last section of this chapter – whether and how such omissions might be avoidable in the future.

#### **During the upheavals, were the context and background adequately explained?**

<sup>211</sup> Interview, 14 February 2012.

<sup>212</sup> Interview, 20 February 2012.

<sup>213</sup> Telephone interview, 5 April 2012.

Our Content Analysis<sup>214</sup> would suggest not. It finds, within its sample of broadcasting on key days during the year, that "potential causes of the protests (unemployment, corruption, rising food prices) were rarely themes" – a "theme" being defined as a subject to which at least 20 seconds of a news item are devoted. It is not certain, however, that this statistical method provides the best way of answering the question. The days chosen for the sample were ones when events were moving very fast, and it is understandable that reporters would have given first priority to an actual description of those events. Twenty seconds is a significant slice of a news item, which as a whole will often only last two or three minutes. My own more anecdotal impression (reflected in some of the examples quoted in previous chapters) is that these potential causes of revolt were in fact mentioned quite often. During the main TV news bulletins, analysis is sometimes provided through "big board" presentations, which allow specialists studio time to give context and background, and sometimes is woven into the daily reporting. Summaries abound like the one given (with pictures to match) by Jeremy Bowen from Cairo six months into the Arab Spring:<sup>215</sup>

In Cairo's poorer quarters you can see why people want a new Middle East. Official corruption made the poverty worse – the regime's real legacy. Too many live in places like Cairo's cramped back alleys. It's hard to feel free if every day is a struggle. To get an idea where the pressure for change is coming from, you just need to go down any street in the Middle East. Around 60% of Arabs are under the age of 30, and a lot of them are just fed up with regimes that haven't even been trying to give them better lives. Now the difference this year is that they feel they can do something about it.

Admittedly, this is fairly broad-brush, but perhaps as good as one can reasonably expect in a television news bulletin, where the need for dramatic images notoriously militates against analytical coverage.<sup>216</sup> In our audience research, viewers expressed appreciation for such pieces of coverage, which put the events of the Arab Spring into context. When asked about the origins of the Arab Spring events, audience members in our research tended to be aware of factors such as difficult economic conditions, disaffected youth, and historic repression in the affected countries, but were less able to talk about the wider context beyond these specific triggers. There was a desire for longer analysis pieces to include broader background, including regional and global issues.

For these more sophisticated analyses, with ifs and buts and subordinate clauses, one probably needs to look to radio – and to the website. Indeed, we have noticed again and again that Radio 4, with the Today programme and The World Tonight, as well as The World At One and PM, not to mention excellent radio documentaries such as Analysis and From Our Own Correspondent, is often where the nuances are supplied and the hard questions asked. And the website almost invariably provides greater depth of background information, with a wealth of question-and-answer features, analysis from correspondents

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<sup>214</sup> Pages 62-64.

<sup>215</sup> News at Ten, 14 July 2011.

<sup>216</sup> Bowen himself says, "I'm aware of the shortcomings of the TV medium. The BBC is multi-platform, but TV makes most impact." He gives the following interesting description of his own working method: "you need the main pictures of the day to tell the broader story. But you also need to take it over a week or two weeks: you cannot do it all in one piece. You use the drama of the main pictures and, through judicious scripting, you use the pictures to report the thrust *and* explain it as you go along." (Interview, 3 February 2012.)

and other aggregated material – special reports which are either country specific or more general, information graphics, maps, and slide shows of "how we got here". Our Audience Research found – as one might expect – that the more "engaged" audiences use the website in two ways: for keeping up to date with the latest events but also "to drill down into individual stories and follow up on details".

It is obviously important, therefore, that those of the television and radio audience who are interested should be aware of this resource. How hard and how often do presenters on radio and television try to tell them about it? Our Content Analysis (Table 44) gives a rather discouraging picture: in TV news, on the 44 days surveyed, a reference to the website was made, either visually or orally, in only 35 out of 985 Arab Spring items. Admittedly, several of these items were often grouped together, in which case one reference to the website would surely suffice. But even allowing for that, reference to the website was clearly the exception, not the rule. And on radio the situation was even worse, with only nine out of 916 Arab Spring items including references to the website. (It is of course harder to provide such links on radio, where there is no visual option.)

To put it another way, Arab Spring items on TV news contained, on average, a reference to the website less than once a day, across the whole of the output analysed for this review; and on domestic radio news it was closer to one reference every five days.

I must add that as far as TV news is concerned this does not square easily with my own impression, formed much less scientifically by viewing News at Six and News at Ten over a longer period. Between 29 January and 9 February 2011, for example, we found that there was a reference to the website on six consecutive days when the events in Egypt were the lead story. The most probable explanation – though we have not been able to verify it – is that such references were much *less* common, in fact virtually non-existent, on the News Channel, BBC World, and current affairs programmes like Newsnight – as well as on radio, where even the Today programme seems seldom if ever to mention the website.

In any event, Stephen Mitchell feels strongly that greater effort should be made:

Viewers and listeners are often made aware of web content, but often they are not. This is one thing that really annoys me. The website is not "new media". It's the third leg on the stool. Yet I have to remind people from time to time – for instance when we have a news item on school league tables it's vital to say that you can find the full tables online. We are getting better at it, but it's still a frustration. Why aren't Today/Breakfast etc. telling their audiences where to go? There aren't rules about how or when it should be done – it's just the proper thing to do. It's normal to say what's coming up in Panorama etc., so why not what's on the website? We have still got work to do on exploring the potential... Our audience research shows that too. People are not interested in generic trails but they *are* interested in specific subjects. We must remember we are a building full of "abnormal" people in constant touch with the news. The audience is *not* "people like us".<sup>217</sup>

For his part Steve Herrmann, the editor of the BBC News website, feels that such "cross trails to online offerings", though not mandatory, are now "absolutely in the culture", and agrees that they are "best when specific"; while from the other end of the process James Stephenson, Editor of News at Six and News at Ten, says:

We put links to the web where we feel there might be an appetite for greater explanation, and where we know the website has material. We're now in quite a

<sup>217</sup> Interview, 6 February 2012.

mature place about this. There is increasing awareness of the site, so do we always need to flag it? I feel it's evident it is there, so you need to try and judge when you *say* go and look at it. I decide who refers to the web and where. We're trying to move in the direction of flagging *particular* pieces of content.<sup>218</sup>

In short there seems to be something of a consensus. Routine reminders of the website's existence are probably neither necessary nor very effective, and could even be counterproductive if the public gets bored and feels they are simply holding up the flow of the news. But whenever possible, specific items that would enable viewers deepen their understanding of the item just reported in the news should be flagged.

## ii. Source material

### Has the BBC been sufficiently cautious in its use of "user-generated content" (UGC)?

For several years before the Arab Spring, the role of the "citizen journalist" had been widely debated among media professionals and scholars. It had become clear that, at a time when fewer and fewer "traditional" news organizations could afford to maintain extensive networks of professional journalists and cameramen around the world, technology had placed in the hands of "ordinary" people the capacity to film and record events as they were happening, and transmit them around the world in a matter of minutes, or even seconds. The iconic example of this was the photograph of the dying student, shot (in both senses) during the demonstrations that followed the 2009 election in Iran, which is said to have been on President Obama's desk within 15 minutes. Yet nothing had quite prepared us for the sheer volume of footage of street protests, and of violence used to repress them, combined with the inaccessibility of much of the action for independent professional media, which has characterized the Arab Spring.

Indeed one might say that, combined with the existence of satellite TV channels able and willing to transmit these images,<sup>219</sup> it has *made* the Arab Spring. Without those endlessly repeated jumpy images of crowds marching, crowds chanting, people running, falling, bleeding, and smoke rising from buildings, how many Arabs would have known that there *was* an Arab Spring, and felt emboldened to take part in it? If that question is unanswerable, another admits of only one answer: can we, the outside world, imagine the Arab Spring without those images? Surely not. UGC has not simply made the story more vivid, more exciting, more telegenic. It has *been* the story, or at very least has transformed its nature.

How does the abundance, and dominance, of such source material affect the ability of the BBC, and other mainstream news organizations, to guarantee the accuracy of the information it transmits? Clearly it poses an enormous challenge, and the BBC is well aware of this,<sup>220</sup> and my impression is that it has made great efforts to handle this

<sup>218</sup> Interview, 7 February 2012.

<sup>219</sup> Among many testimonies to the importance of this, here is that of Ian Pannell, whom the BBC deployed in practically every arena of protest and struggle in the Middle East during 2011: "most important [in spreading the protests from one country to another], rather than social media, was Al Jazeera Arabic – people were glued to the screen watching events that took place elsewhere". (Telephone interview, 12 April 2012.)

<sup>220</sup> To some extent, so is the audience. Our Audience Research showed that the groups interviewed wanted the BBC to make appropriate use of UGC. They expected the latest updates on a story to appear online first, but also raised questions about accuracy and

material responsibly. Among the most impressive people I interviewed in the course of this assessment were the team that carries out this work at BBC Online – Nathalie Malinarich, World Editor, [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk); Tarik Kafala, Middle East Editor, [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk); and Chris Hamilton, Social Media Editor, who runs the "UGC Hub" in the newsroom, which the BBC had the foresight to create six years ago.<sup>221</sup> Designed originally to handle unsolicited material sent in by the audience, the Hub now combines this with a proactive newsgathering role, focused on the social media – since, as they ruefully recognise, the BBC "might not now be the first port of call for anyone wanting to disseminate news". It is the Hub's job to get content verified and put out on a bulletin, especially when there is a big breaking story, and the key source or witness may be an "ordinary" person. The footage may be a news-line in itself, or may form part of a number of stories.

Clearly the BBC has learnt fast how to check the authenticity of UGC footage. In judging material from the Arab world it is able to draw on the resources of the Arabic service and of the BBC Monitoring service in Caversham. Both contain people familiar with the life and topography of Arab cities – able to judge, for instance, as one Syrian producer from Monitoring was, when what had been presented as film of military police herding people on to a bus for transfer to a detention camp in fact simply showed the normal scene in Damascus in the rush hour. More often than not, they can now judge whether a scene was really filmed at the place and time that the supplier claims, by monitoring such details as the weather, buildings visible, number-plates of cars – and by listening carefully to what the crowd is chanting and in what accent or dialect.<sup>222</sup> Ideally, of course, they communicate directly with the person who did the filming. That is not always possible, but

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fact checking. This neatly encapsulates the dilemma for the BBC – it has to be fast, but it also has to preserve its reputation for accuracy.

<sup>221</sup> Interview, 9 January 2012.

<sup>222</sup> See blog by Alex Murray, one of the journalists in the UGC Hub, 18 May 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/bbcsms-bbc-procedures-for-veri.shtml>. Nathalie Malinarich <sup>(email,</sup> 14 March 2012) has explained in detail the time-consuming and labour-intensive process through which the UGC team assesses video coming out of Syria:

"They usually get Monitoring or a BBC expert (and Arabic speaker) to take a look at the video first to provide a translation and any additional contextual information they can derive from it (e.g. location, time of day, etc). They usually provide an assessment about the veracity of the video based on other videos/images they may have seen that same day or reports that might support what the video may show.

"The UGC hub also keeps across the social media feeds of the activists and also get emails directly from them where they give us their version of what the videos are about/say. If they provide translations for the videos, UGC will check if the translations are accurate or not. They will also then check against other sources (eg agency feeds) to see if similar footage has also been filed.

"Over time, UGC have developed our own way of rating the credibility of certain activist social media accounts, based on how accurate they have been over a period of time.

"Any video that is passed on to output will be marked clearly with accompanying notes, giving the appropriate level of caution that should be included in cues describing them - so the audience understands their context (eg 'this video has not been verified independently, but activists who uploaded it say it shows x').

"On the website, we also check and use the Syrian state news agency, SANA."

people supplying content have become more aware of the need to prove their authenticity, and take trouble to include the kind of detail mentioned above.

All that said, there is no escaping the fact that most of the people concerned are not neutral bystanders or aspiring journalists, but citizens with a strong interest in the outcome. They are not necessarily representative of the population – nor can one assume that all social and political groups are equally media-savvy. These pictures do not become available on YouTube and other social media by accident, but because those who film and post them desperately need and want "the world" to see and hear their story, which means of course their *side* of the story. While it may be good that they have become more sophisticated in the sense of understanding the need to prove their authenticity, the same sophistication can be used to "improve" the image. A good example appeared recently on Al Jazeera's excellent media programme Listening Post, showing how easy it is for activists to give an urban landscape the appearance of having been subjected to heavy shelling, simply by burning a few tyres.<sup>223</sup> Like all wars, the wars of the Arab Spring are being fought on the information and propaganda front; and just as advances in military technology give advantage now to offence, now to defence, so there is a premium for the side which is ahead in understanding and applying the latest developments in information technology. At least in the first phase of the Arab Spring, that advantage lay with opposition activists, but some regimes – notably the Syrian – have been catching up, learning for instance how to infiltrate and manipulate the email accounts, blogs and tweets of some of their opponents.<sup>224</sup>

UGC is evidently here to stay as a major component of news coverage. It contributes to a strong sense of emotional engagement for audiences, and also brings an important sense of the reality of the front line, which can contribute to perceptions of accuracy, if audiences are convinced that broadcasters have made the appropriate checks. Ignoring or banning it from BBC output is not an option. The sheer volume of the material, and in many cases its nature, often give it overall credibility even when individual items are not fully verifiable. Perhaps the BBC, along with other media, did not immediately grasp the selective and therefore potentially misleading character of much of this material. Over the months, journalists and editors do seem to have become more aware of this problem, and have made an effort to widen the angle of vision. Images of pro-regime demonstrations, usually taken from state television, have perhaps been given slightly more airtime. Jeremy Bowen's report from District 86, a predominantly Alawite and pro-Assad part of Damascus, in late January 2012, was an interesting example. But he could only go there because – exceptionally – the regime had given him permission to enter the country; and even, then most of his reports strengthened rather than qualified the message conveyed by UGC, because to his own surprise he kept discovering more districts and suburbs controlled by the FSA.<sup>225</sup> The lesson learnt by the government, unfortunately, was probably that its

<sup>223</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2012/04/2012413143613618722.html>.

<sup>224</sup> In Sudan, the government was quicker on the uptake, and succeeded in nipping an incipient "Arab Spring" protest movement in the bud: "Pro-government agents infiltrated anti-government sites, spreading disinformation and looking to triangulate the identities of the chief organizers. They'd barrage Facebook pages with pornography, then report the pages to Facebook for violating the rules." See Alan Boswell, "How Sudan used the Internet to crush protest movement", McClatchy Newspapers, April 6, 2011, (<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/06/111637/sudans-government-crushed-protests.html#storylink=cpy>).

<sup>225</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16768944>.

previous calculation had been correct – letting independent journalists into the country would only make matters worse from its point of view. Better, it probably thinks, to let the foreign media rely on UGC, whose credibility we can constantly question and sometimes undermine,<sup>226</sup> than to have foreign journalists giving their own direct eyewitness testimony.

### **Has the BBC been sufficiently transparent in making the audience aware of the origin of such content?**

Our Content Analysis found (pp.57-58, Table 41) that "only in a minority of cases" was the BBC's use of UGC accompanied by a caveat "either about authenticity or representativeness or both", though the authors charitably assume that, when no such caveat appears, "this is because such material is thoroughly reviewed before appearing on news programmes making in the majority of cases the use of caveats unnecessary". I asked Stephen Mitchell whether this is in fact the policy. He replied:

The policy is not as clear as that, but perhaps it should be. Some of it is pretty controversial, and there you absolutely should spell that out. I think we should have done that more often, down the spectrum towards the *less* controversial – e.g. somebody in their own home doing something on a mobile phone. Probably there are not enough formal warnings. I'm grappling with this very subject – setting up a BBC-wide training course on social media, including – for News – social media as a newsgathering tool. It has grown so incredibly quickly, we're running to keep up in terms of compliance. If a story is obviously going to cause controversy – like the stuff we see from Syria – we recognise it's a bit of an issue.

You can use a strap across the film – but we need to get a clear view whether we do that every time. (And of course that's not possible on radio...)<sup>227</sup>

Personally, having browsed through BBC coverage over a fuller time scale than the Content Analysis, but in a far less systematic or scientific way, I was struck by the frequency with which such warnings – "this is amateur footage, which cannot be independently verified", or the like – do occur, either spoken by the reporter or emblazoned on the screen.

### **How far does the audience absorb these caveats?**

At least, according to our Audience Research (pp.11-12), the audience is aware of "mixing of social media footage with official reporting" as one of the three main challenges to accuracy that the BBC faces (the others being "new" and "fast-moving" events). "Reports using social media footage could raise questions amongst respondents about the provenance and authenticity of the footage. However, notwithstanding this, audiences were supportive of incorporating social media content into official broadcasts as it was acknowledged that this was often the first or only material available; it was also felt to help convey the human impacts of the conflicts (and thereby contributed to their emotional engagement)." The audience is anxious, therefore, to see that "efforts had been taken to ensure accurate reporting", and feels that among the ways to demonstrate this would be "checking the provenance and authenticity of social media or other external footage", as well as "being transparent about areas of uncertainty". At the same time,

<sup>226</sup> As, for instance, when a woman previously reported to have been beheaded was produced alive and well in a Damascus television studio. ("Syrian unrest: Woman reported dead 'appears on TV'", BBC News Middle East, 5 October 2011; "Syrian TV girl: Mistaken identity", Today programme, 6 October 2011.)

<sup>227</sup> Telephone interview, 5 April 2012.

however, members of the sample group felt that "seeing is believing". Therefore they wanted to see "as many images of impacts on the ground as possible", and also felt that images should have "minimal editing" and be "as close to 'primary evidence' as possible". The research team adds that "potentially influenced by the contribution of social media, respondents often referred to the perceived rawness of footage as being indicative of accuracy." In other words, the audience may not yet have fully grasped that "raw footage" can in itself be deceptive, and may need editing in order to ensure that it is accurately understood in its context.

Members of the audience sample also understood that UGC is not itself sufficient. They see "having knowledgeable reporters on the ground", and "showing impacts on the ground (e.g. casualties)" as elements which *both* help them to feel emotionally engaged *and* are integral to their perceptions of accuracy (p.13). (This validates the risks and hardships undergone by intrepid reporters like Paul Wood, venturing into the thick of battle in Homs.) But, when asked (p.8) if they were aware of any of the Arab Spring countries where there were particular dangers or restrictions for journalists, the audience sample were unable to name any particular country. This suggests that frequent statements on air such as those referred to in the Syria chapter above ("foreign journalists are restricted from reporting freely within Syria", or "international journalists are banned from Syria") do not fully register with the audience, and therefore that the latter may not yet understand all the reasons *why* the BBC and other media sometimes have to rely so heavily on UGC.

There is perhaps a particular danger when UGC footage is not only shown, so to speak, "in its own right", but used "as wallpaper", while the announcer is introducing a news item, or during a telephone interview, or while the reporter, speaking to camera, is making a general point about the situation. One understands why this is done – the footage is the most vivid way to signal to the audience what the "talking head" in front of it is talking *about*. But using it to frame the story in this way is a kind of implicit authentication, which may tend to counteract whatever caveat is provided, conveying to the audience almost subliminally that the BBC accepts and vouches for the images on screen.<sup>228</sup>

To sum up: by its nature UGC tends to come overwhelmingly from opposition activists, and thus to reinforce the perception that they are on the side of the angels, their opponents on the other. Yet it often tells a very important story, and cannot be ignored. The BBC is well aware of this dilemma, and is making great efforts – perhaps greater than any other news organization – to handle it responsibly. But there is no obvious solution – other than to make sure that concerns about source material are fully shared with the audience.

### iii. Diversity of output

#### **Does the BBC make sufficient use of the wide variety of programmes it puts out to ensure coverage of a wide range of voices and opinions?**

We have noted, in the first section of this chapter, the valuable contribution made by radio discussions, documentaries and other current affairs programmes, as well as the website, in providing more context and background than is often possible on television news bulletins. We have also noted, at various points, the valuable contributions made by

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<sup>228</sup> This point was drawn to my attention by Kevin Bakhurst, Controller of the BBC News Channel – who added, however, that presenters on that channel are "very good at threading in when we need to say we are not sure". It did not come up during the audience research – but that may simply indicate that the audience is not aware of it.

Newsnight on BBC Two, and by the two daily news round-ups on BBC World – GMT and The Hub – as well as the excellent interview programme Hardtalk. It is really regrettable that this last is only available to domestic viewers in the small hours of the morning (on the News Channel). For other audiences, we also note the important contributions made by Radio 5 Live<sup>229</sup> and by Newsbeat (Radio 1) and the Jeremy Vine Show (Radio 2).<sup>230</sup>

To these should be added the BBC's output of documentaries. Several excellent Panorama programmes have already been mentioned in the country chapters on Egypt, Libya and Syria, as well as the film "The Invasion of Lampedusa" which went out on This World (BBC Two) in June 2011. In February 2012 this strand also broadcast an outstanding documentary, "Children of the Revolution", which told the story of Egypt in 2011 through the personal histories of three very different young revolutionaries – Gigi, a woman from a wealthy family, passionately devoted to the cause of freedom; Ahmed an unemployed man from a poor district of Cairo; and Taher, a Salafist preacher, harassed and persecuted by the police at the beginning of the story, flushed with electoral success and feeling close to real change by the end of it. Also on BBC Two, in September 2011, were two hour-long programmes, "How Facebook Changed the World", in which the presenter Mishal Husain spent time with "activists who helped spread the revolution in Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain and Syria", while in March 2012 Nel Hedayat undertook a similar journey – to Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria<sup>231</sup> for the younger audience on BBC Three. We have noted above that on Bahrain this formula came unstuck, giving a crudely one-sided picture of the conflict there; but the treatment of Libya was undoubtedly better, since there Hedayat gave a human face to some of Gaddafi's supporters as well as his opponents, and was careful to distance herself from some of the latter's gloating over his inglorious end. Mention should also be made of an unusual programme by Alan Yentob in the "Imagine" series, focused on Cairo's Egyptian Museum, which is situated in Tahrir Square and was therefore at the heart of events.<sup>232</sup>

All of those were on television. On Radio 4, one should mention several excellent Analysis programmes – "Libya's Islamic Capitalists" (September 2011); "Hague's Middle East" (June 2011); "Egypt's New Islamists" (June 2011); Rethinking the Middle East (February 2011) – as well as contributions from Crossing Continents – "Libyan Refugees" (July 2011); "Egypt: Sisters of the Revolution" (April 2011) – and The Report – one on Tunisia (May 2011) and one on Libya (March 2011) – and two special features: Stephen Sackur's "How did we get here...? Egypt" (broadcast on 4 and 6 February 2011, while the drama in Tahrir Square was still unfolding) and Jeremy Bowen's three-part series "Tales from the Arab Spring" at the end of the year.

All these documentaries were interesting, and some truly outstanding. But they do not amount to a very large output over the year, given the volume and diversity of stories thrown up by the Arab Spring and the number of different outlets the BBC has available to it. The Arab Spring perhaps merited more, and in some cases more nuanced, major television documentaries from the BBC. One has the impression that those which were

<sup>229</sup> Phone-ins on 5Live in 2011 included "Is it our business who runs Egypt?"; "Do we have blood on our hands over Libya?"; and "Air strikes – should we take action against Gaddafi?" Our Content Analysis included two hours of the station on each day of the sample – one from Breakfast and one from 5Live Drive.

<sup>230</sup> Both of these programmes were covered in our Content Analysis.

<sup>231</sup> In fact, neither Husain nor Hedayat actually entered Syria: they met Syrian activists in neighbouring countries.

<sup>232</sup> BBC One, 5 July 2011, at 10.35pm.

made resulted from decisions by individual commissioners, rather than a coordinated attempt to think how the BBC as a whole could use its resources to cover all the different aspects of the Arab Spring. I will return in the next section to the question of whether, and how, current BBC structures encourage or allow for strategic coordination of that nature.

**Conversely, does the BBC perhaps rely too much on smaller-audience programmes to provide diversity, rather than making the effort to include it in the news bulletins that have the largest audience?**

This is a point of serious concern. The reader may feel that in this assessment I have devoted too much attention to coverage specifically available to the audience on the two main domestic television news bulletins, News at Six and News at Ten<sup>233</sup> (and on the unique Today programme on Radio 4). But I have not done so without reason.

Of course no one expects main bulletins with restricted space (News at Six runs around nine items a night; News at Ten around eight) to cover every aspect of every story. The function of current affairs on both television and radio is indeed to expand on the coverage these bulletins provide. Newsnight Editor Peter Rippon says "We're there to add perspective";<sup>234</sup> and Nicola Meyrick, Executive Editor, Radio Current Affairs, describes the role of her department as "multi-faceted. It adds depth. In rolling news or 'built' bulletins like the Six and Ten there is not always the time to go behind the news – even on the 24-hour News Channel, packages are quite short. Radio current affairs covers aspects others cannot, and finds out new things. We aim to give voices to the people involved."<sup>235</sup>

The website, too, can "stitch together a bigger picture,"<sup>236</sup> providing invaluable background and context as well as up to date information on big running stories on "live" pages.

But, as Head of Newsroom Mary Hockaday says, "it's certainly the case that current affairs has more time to pursue more angles in more length or depth, but that in no way exonerates us – impartiality is at the heart of what we do."<sup>237</sup>

The audience for BBC news is vast – it accounts for 31% of all television news minutes broadcast in the UK but 73% of all minutes of television news consumed in the UK.<sup>238</sup> That audience has a great deal of trust in BBC news, and has very high expectations of it.<sup>239</sup> Our Audience Research found that while individual news items on the Arab Spring

<sup>233</sup> Both of these cover international news, of course, but the latter has a particular "remit to do foreign affairs". (Interview with James Stephenson, 7 February 2012.)

<sup>234</sup> Interview, 6 February 2012

<sup>235</sup> Interview, 9 January 2012

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Steve Herrmann, 23 November 2011

<sup>237</sup> Email to author, 23 April 2012.

<sup>238</sup> BARB 2011/12, News: National/International and News: Miscellaneous on BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, ITV1, Channel 4, Channel 5 plus news channels (BBC News Channel, Sky News, Euro News, Fox News), all adults.

<sup>239</sup> 59% regard BBC as the "most trusted" news provider – more than 8 times higher than any other single organization. (BBC response to Ofcom's invitation to comment on measuring Media Plurality: source Ipsos MORI for BBC, UK adults 16+ who follow the news (977), November 2011.)

did provide "clues" which helped people to form a view on their accuracy and impartiality, on a day-to-day basis a lot of their judgement was informed by their trust in the BBC as an organization.<sup>240</sup> News on terrestrial TV is the main source for "finding out about the world" for 49% of people, far higher than any other source.<sup>241</sup>

As might be expected, news coverage on BBC One dominates. The unique reach of news on BBC One (meaning the number of viewers who watch TV news on that channel *and no other*) is 7,738,000, while the corresponding figure for BBC Two is 256,000, and for the 24-hour digital BBC News Channel 621,000.<sup>242</sup> News at Six and News at Ten attract average audiences of 4,352,000 and 4,286,000 respectively, far greater than any news programme from any other broadcaster or from any other BBC channel – the equivalent average audiences for Newsnight on BBC Two and World News Today on BBC Four are 664,000 and 55,000 respectively.<sup>243</sup>

On radio, the Today programme has an average weekly audience of 7.2 million listeners,<sup>244</sup> is punctuated by regular news bulletins and devotes a big part of its time to discussing items in the news. I therefore include it as one of the "flagship" bulletins that many rely on for daily news. But, since it lasts three hours Monday-to-Friday (and two hours on Saturday), and can run up to 30 items in that time, it is something of a cross between news and current affairs.<sup>245</sup> And of course, very few of its audience are absorbing its whole output.

The main TV bulletins cannot, therefore, be expected to match it in the amount of background and context, or the diversity of opinion, that they include. It is none the less crucial that the domestic audience for these flagship bulletins be given a wide enough range of perspectives, and context, to help them "make sense of events" (BBC Editorial Guidelines 11.1). This raises important questions about just how far key aspects of a story can be "delegated" to current affairs programmes or to the website.

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79% agree that the BBC provides a range of perspectives in news stories. This figure is higher than that for any other media, and of course implies an expectation that the BBC will continue to do so. (*ibid.*: source ICM for BBC, 1,003 GB adults 18+, 11-13 November 2011.)

<sup>240</sup> It does appear from the Audience Research, however, that "engaged" audiences are "triangulating" their different news sources and seeking a range of perspectives in order to decipher the Arab Spring events from a variety of angles. Thus, while the onus is still on broadcasters to provide high quality coverage, responsibility for determining the "truth" appears to be shared with engaged audiences. (Audience Research, p3.)

<sup>241</sup> The results of Ofcom's second PSB review showed that 49% of people use news on terrestrial television channels as their main media source for finding out about the world (2008: p30). (From *The World in Focus*, June 2009, International Broadcasting Trust.)

<sup>242</sup> BARB 2011/12, News: National/International and News: Miscellaneous, 3 mins, UK adults, 16+. Channels included in the analysis: BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, BBC News, ITV1, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News. The equivalent unique reach figures based on 1-min reach are: BBC One: 5,827,000; BBC Two: 168,000; BBC News Channel: 361,000.

<sup>243</sup> 2012 YTD, TV News Report, BBC Marketing and Audiences, UK adults, 16+.

<sup>244</sup> Rajar, UK listeners, 15+, Q1 2012.

<sup>245</sup> "It's at least as much current affairs as news." Ceri Thomas and Jasmin Buttar, Editor and Deputy Editor, Today, interviewed 6 February 2012.

For the truth is that these major news bulletins do concentrate on reporting the main events and developments of the day,<sup>246</sup> and do not always succeed in conveying context. This may explain why one of the key findings of our Audience Research was that even audience members intentionally recruited as having at least some level of understanding of, and interest in, the Arab Spring did not always fully grasp some elements of the story, including notably the wider context and background, the less "iconic" events and lower-profile uprisings, as well as the outlook for the future.<sup>247</sup>

While to some extent this is inevitable (and of course not *all* the audience is looking for this amount of detail), it can be argued that the BBC should do better in this area. It is not wholly immune from the pressures of journalistic rivalry. I was concerned by the number of BBC executives and correspondents who, when interviewed for this assessment, felt the need to refer to an incident on the night of 21 August 2011 when Alex Crawford, a reporter for Sky News, reached Green Square in Tripoli with a rebel column some hours ahead of all competitors, including the BBC. This led to some "David and Goliath" style hand-rubbing by newspapers habitually critical of the BBC, and possibly for that reason has given rise to a lot of hand-*wringing* within the BBC, but should in my view have very little effect on one's judgement of BBC coverage of the war in Libya as a whole. I suggest that the BBC needs to be less concerned with competition of this nature, but should constantly ask itself whether those watching its main news bulletins are likely to have absorbed and understood the most important things going on in the world. To the extent that they might not have, that is where the BBC should concentrate any efforts to improve its performance.

#### iv. Strategic Direction?

##### **Has the BBC been assiduous enough in proactively identifying major issues, with a view to investigating and highlighting them for the public?**

Although in the course of covering the Arab Spring the BBC has undoubtedly produced much outstanding journalism, it has been acknowledged or implied by several interlocutors within the BBC that in the years *before* 2011 its coverage had somewhat neglected the wider Arab world, while focusing intensely on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And we have noted in the course of this survey that, since the Arab Spring began, staff and resources have been deployed intensively to successive scenes of dramatic action – Egypt in January-February 2011, Libya between February and October, Syria more

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<sup>246</sup> I asked Stephen Mitchell whether this was "a formally stated policy". He replied: "It wouldn't need to be stated – that is what they're there for. It's where the BBC will give you a concentrated view of what's happened – but it shouldn't be to the exclusion of everything else, and nor would the current editor of those bulletins say so. It's no good just doing a single item on Syria: you have to do one on what's happening inside the country and then one on the international efforts, so that's two stories – it has to be given some context. If the BBC has done something more investigative – e.g. Sue Lloyd Roberts in Syria for Newsnight – one would expect a shortened version on the 10 or the 6 and their radio equivalents. Not a lot of space, but to flag it..." (Telephone interview, 5 April 2012.)

<sup>247</sup> Yet some at least of the audience are aware of the limitations of TV news bulletins. Our Audience Research found that, while contextual reporting was welcomed and valued in general, it was also broadly understood that a main TV news bulletin does not always have the time to provide wider context or deeper background, given the need to round up all of the day's main news. Context could also be gathered via other sources, such as online.

recently – while countries outside this spotlight tended to receive rather sparse and sporadic coverage. This leaves an overall impression of an operation that is fast on its feet and imaginative in reacting to crises, but perhaps less good at taking major strategic decisions that might require going against the immediate pressures of the moment. This observation has led me to ask whether the BBC is structurally equipped for such strategic decisions, and if so, how and where it would expect to take them.

Of course, major structural decisions about world news coverage are currently in the process of being taken, within the framework of "Delivering Quality First" (DQF), a plan launched in January 2011 with the avowed purpose of achieving 20% savings in the overall BBC budget in the period up to 2017, in order to absorb the cap on the licence fee and the new funding responsibilities (including the World Service, hitherto funded by a Foreign Office grant) imposed on the BBC in its licence fee settlement agreed with the Government in October 2010.<sup>248</sup>

One of the changes already agreed in principle (and mentioned earlier in this report) is a closer integration of newsgathering between the BBC's domestic output and the World Service, including the foreign-language services, which in the Arab world will mean a greater reliance on bilingual correspondents able to report in both English and Arabic and to address regional, international and UK domestic audiences. This should not be threatening to impartiality, since the World Service, like all BBC services, is held to high standards of impartiality and has a worldwide reputation for excellence in that respect. Carried through successfully, this reform should bring greater depth and authority to the reports from the region received by UK audiences – though of course extra care will also need to be taken to ensure that these audiences are provided with context and background enabling them to follow these reports.

Peter Horrocks, Director of BBC Global News, explained to me that

the World Service and BBC News are now both part of "One News Group". We are working on how, as we'll all be within one building in Broadcasting House, we can get efficiencies, and UK and global audiences can benefit from shared expertise and resources. There have historically been two perspectives on international news – one that takes the international agenda and interprets it for UK audiences, the other that takes the international agenda and makes it relevant for global audiences. We need to find a way of integrating those perspectives.

How we cover the Middle East could be a good illustration. There's been some criticism from within the UK that we don't give a varied enough perspective from across the Arabic world. The World Service fully funded by the licence fee can meet this demand by providing a range of perspectives from its local Arabic teams.<sup>249</sup>

From the point of view of impartiality, such a broader "range of perspectives" could only be welcomed, and it's encouraging that the demand for this comes from within the UK.

Clearly, important decisions are being, and will be, taken within the context of DQF. But equally clearly, there is a need for strategic decisions separate from, and reaching beyond, the current largely cost-driven exercise. I therefore put some questions to Stephen Mitchell, Deputy Director and Head of Programmes, BBC News, about the **central planning structure through which strategic decisions on the overall nature of**

<sup>248</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/deliveringqualityfirst.html>.

<sup>249</sup> Email, 25 April 2012.

## news and current affairs coverage, and consequent deployment of resources, are made.

He replied that there is a News Board, which "looks at how we run BBC News as a business", and "meets twice a month – once for business reasons and once for editorial". The editorial meetings, he said, are normally attended by senior executives representing the English regions, the Nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), Global News and Network News. The Network News representatives would include himself, Helen Boaden (Director, BBC News), Fran Unsworth (Head of Newsgathering), Mary Hockaday (Head of Newsroom)<sup>250</sup> and Sue English (Head of Political Programmes at Westminster); while from the Global side there would be Peter Horrocks together with colleagues from the World Service (English and foreign-language). If the discussion focused on a particular area of coverage, Unsworth would normally be accompanied by one or more colleagues from that area.

I asked how these meetings had operated in 2011, and particularly how strategy for covering the Arab Spring had been handled.

**Mitchell:** Last year the Arab Spring was an agenda item. The meeting has a global agenda, a lot of business to get through. Sometimes we would say, this story is so important we need to better understand it – then Helen would trigger a "Big Stories" meeting devoted to that thematic issue – a whole half-day with all members of News Board plus interested parties.

I then asked how the Middle East Editor, Jeremy Bowen, would have been involved.

**Mitchell:** A "Big Stories" meeting specifically about the Arab Spring was in fact called by Helen and included the Director-General and some of our senior programme editors along with several of our Middle East experts, among them Jeremy Bowen.

Also in the editorial side of the News Board – Jeremy and the Middle East bureau editor<sup>251</sup> submit papers to that board on a quarterly basis. The Board also takes a report on our coverage of the Middle East twice a year written by our Senior Editorial Adviser Malcolm Balen who monitors coverage.

**EM:** So is that when strategic decisions about Middle East coverage would be taken?

**Mitchell:** Yes, it would be at that (News Board) level that those sorts of decisions have to be made. Very long term ones – planning the shape of newsgathering,

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<sup>250</sup> I cannot resist expressing the hope here, though it is not strictly a matter of either accuracy or impartiality, that "DQF", part of which involves "continuing to reduce senior management numbers ... and flattening the structure to ensure there are no more than five layers between the Director-General to [*sic*] the most junior member of staff", might include also a review of the *nomenclature* of senior management positions, of departments, and of individual programmes. While BBC insiders may immediately know the difference between "Newsgathering", "the Newsroom", "Network News", "the News Channel", "BBC World", "Global News" etc., and between "This World", "Our World", "World News Today" and "The World Tonight" (to name but a few), the outsider quickly feels himself at sea. One of the greatest communications organizations in the world really should do a better job of communicating its own internal structures and divisions. *Sancta simplicitas!*

<sup>251</sup> Paul Danahar, based in Jerusalem

where bureaus are etc. – would be for the full News Board under the auspices of DQF. Shorter term ones would be done by Newsgathering.<sup>252</sup>

What this shows is that the BBC is actually quite a decentralised body, whose senior executives come together regularly to inform each other what they are up to, to coordinate their activities, and to discuss the allocation of resources. But it seems to me that the initiative is left very much to the heads of the various departments, to the commissioning editors, and to the editors of individual programmes, who of course each tailor their output to their specific audience. Such an approach has many advantages, and no doubt allows many people at various levels to take creative decisions. But it does, perhaps, leave open a question about major strategic decisions such as those whose absence has been remarked by various people quoted in the course of this review.

There is an annual document drawn up by and for the BBC News Group entitled "Divisional Objectives" (or latterly "Objectives & Actions"), which generally does identify some "Big Stories" for the year. In 2010-11 these included "Developments in Afghanistan/Pakistan" and "Globally pivotal developments in emerging economies such as China and Brazil", and in 2011-12 "the escalating protests in the Middle East". Clearly these are not meant as exhaustive lists, and there must be further strategic discussion, presumably at the News Board meetings mentioned above, about how to interpret and implement them. It is at this stage that one would hope, without encroaching on the necessary autonomy of departments and editors, to see a clearer identification of priorities and allocation of staff and resources to different parts or aspects of a given "big story" – or, looking at it from the other end, an appropriate sharing-out of the latter among the various departments, "strands" and programmes that together make up the BBC's vast news and current affairs output.

Seven years ago, in an effort to ensure that the Middle East was covered more strategically and more consistently, the BBC created the post of Middle East Editor and appointed Jeremy Bowen to fill it. As noted several times in this report, Bowen is an outstanding reporter and analyst, remarkably skilled in making the complexities of the region intelligible to a mass audience. He has also travelled throughout the region, and on occasion more widely, during his tenure. In 2010, for instance he visited Yemen twice, Egypt twice, Washington twice, Syria once (including an interview with President Bashar al-Assad), Israel and the Palestinian Territories at least four times, Lebanon once and Geneva once, as well as interviewing the Lebanese prime minister in London.

But perhaps BBC executives should encourage him to travel a little less, so that he would have more time to share his insight and provide them with overall strategic guidance. As he himself remarked when explaining the lack of a "bespoke" piece on the Syrian opposition, "my schedule was always very full. The BBC has only one Middle East editor and I can't be everywhere all the time."<sup>253</sup> There is clearly a tension here, or a gap not easily bridged, between the role of an inspired leader on the ground who has a huge patch to cover and does it superlatively well, and the role of people running the news machine back at base who continually have to make choices in terms of people, resources and audience engagement, and who perhaps cannot always get the advice they need, at the moment when they need it, from an expert who is out in the field.

Was a decision taken *not* to focus more intensely, in the years before 2011, on the internal affairs of Arab countries and the relations of their rulers with the West? Or was

<sup>252</sup> Telephone interview, 5 April 2012, supplemented and corrected by email to author, 26 April.

<sup>253</sup> Email to author, 23 April 2012. (See above, p.51, note 140.)

the issue never actually debated in those terms by people with the authority to decide? Was a decision taken *during* 2011 that with everything else going on it was simply not worth making more than a token effort to focus attention on Saudi Arabia – its role in the region, the amount and kind of assistance it gives to governments in some Arab countries and to opposition groups in others, its importance to British and Western interests, its internal structure, the kind of pressures which might be affecting its stability? Or did such a "decision" simply happen by default?

If these decisions *were* taken, there may have been good reasons for them, but the premises should perhaps be re-examined. If they were *not* taken, one should ask why not. Do the structure and agenda of News Board meetings, and the inputs to them, need modifying in any way? Answers to such questions lie beyond the scope of this review, but could be considered by the BBC itself.

## Summary of Findings

### Introductory

- Since the Editorial Guidelines define one of the principles of impartiality as being the provision of a broad range of subject matter and perspectives over an appropriate timeframe across the BBC's whole output, I have taken it as part of my task to consider whether all aspects of the Arab Spring story have been adequately covered, or whether the intense focus on certain episodes might have allowed other events, even whole countries, to forfeit the degree of attention which their importance deserved.

### Framing of the Conflicts

- The Content Analysis found widespread use of the word "regime", which carries an implicit value judgement. As far as I have been able to discover, no clear or consistent guidance on the use of this term was issued.
- The narrative of an "Arab Spring", espoused at the time by many Arabs as well as Western experts, was a natural and appropriate one for the BBC to use. But with hindsight, it should perhaps have been questioned more closely, and at an earlier stage.

### Egypt

- Coverage of the dramatic events leading to the departure of President Mubarak on 11 February 2011 was outstanding. Although the excitement and euphoria of the protesting crowds were well conveyed, a wide variety of voices were heard, including supporters of Mubarak and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. (But, with hindsight, the importance of the "Salafist" current of opinion was missed at first.) By and large BBC correspondents retained their professional detachment, stressing the problems and uncertainties that lay ahead as well as the undoubted historic significance of the events they were witnessing – although some sample audience members felt that their tone was on occasion too emotive or that analysis was veering into opinion.
- But after 11 February there was a marked drop in the intensity of coverage, as attention and resources were diverted to other parts of the region, mainly Libya. Although there were some good reports from Egypt between March and October, the BBC's domestic viewers and listeners were not fully alerted to the continuing dominance of the army during this period, or to the numerous acts of repression

and attacks on women, with the result that the renewed coverage in November, with a prevailing tone far more cautious, even gloomy, than that of the reports in January and February, marked an unduly abrupt change (although our sample audience did find the tone of this later reporting more impartial than that of the first months).

## Libya

- The BBC did well to maintain a presence on both sides throughout the civil war. Efforts were made consistently to give the Gaddafi regime opportunities to state its position, and the BBC (with CNN and the Sunday Times) secured the only interview given by Gaddafi himself during the entire period. The existence of support for Gaddafi was also frequently mentioned, although few non-official voices were found to express that support.
- British involvement in the conflict led to it being more intensively and consistently covered than others in the region. The objectives and wisdom of British policy were rigorously scrutinised, and ministers were repeatedly questioned. The nature and policies of the rebel movement that Britain was supporting were also interrogated, though perhaps not so intensively.
- In particular, there was relatively little coverage of human rights violations by the anti-Gaddafi side, until after its capture of Tripoli in August. Statements about "African mercenaries" fighting on Gaddafi's side were too often uncritically accepted, and the real plight of sub-Saharan migrant workers in Libya during the conflict was under-reported.

## Bahrain

- The BBC, at least on its domestic news bulletins, initially underplayed the sectarian aspect of the conflict, and did not adequately convey the motives of those (Sunni Arabs and expatriates) who supported the monarchy in resisting demands for full democracy.
- After the government of Bahrain withdrew security forces from Pearl Roundabout on 19 February, the BBC withdrew its correspondents for security reasons. The events of the following three weeks – a period when there were no fatalities but widespread sectarian clashes, a deterioration of law and order, and an apparently good-faith but ultimately unsuccessful attempt by the Crown Prince to establish dialogue with the opposition – were left virtually unreported. The BBC returned (briefly) to cover events at the end of this period, when Saudi troops entered the country and the government cracked down hard, with a number of demonstrators being killed and many others arrested and tortured. But failure to cover the preceding period meant that these reports lacked a very important element of context.
- Frank Gardner's visit in April 2011 provided some more carefully contextualised coverage, but the general pattern of reporting has continued – brief bursts of coverage triggered by a particular event, with long periods of silence in between.

## Syria

- The main TV news bulletins were slow to widen their angle of vision from the immediate story of protests and repression to cover the possible outcomes and the implications of deep sectarian divisions among the Syrian population. Radio – especially Today and The World Tonight on Radio 4 – did much better.

- While coverage of the insurrection during the winter of 2011-12 was outstanding (especially Paul Wood's reports from Homs), there could and should have been more investigation of the component strands within the opposition, its ideological roots, and the kind of regime that its victory might bring to power.
- The protests in the early months were portrayed as essentially peaceful and non-violent. Some sources suggest that in fact they included an element of armed struggle from very early on. In the present state of our knowledge, we cannot say that BBC reporters got this wrong, but there must at least be a question whether some of them should not have been more on the look-out for signs that rebels were beginning to take up arms.

## Other countries

- **Tunisia:** The BBC, by the admission of its own senior executives, was slow to recognise the importance of what was happening in the country in December 2010 and early January 2011; but it was the only UK broadcaster to get to Tunisia before President Ben Ali fell, and did a good job keeping its audience informed of developments in Tunisia thereafter.
- **Yemen:** Access and safety issues made this a difficult country to cover. In spite of this there were some good reports, but BBC executives did not make anything like the same efforts to overcome these difficulties as they did, for example, in Syria. Given that some distinguished BBC journalists (Justin Webb, Stephen Sackur) stressed the high risk of Yemen collapsing into chaos and the high stakes for Britain and the West, there should perhaps have been greater eagerness to describe and explain what was happening there.
- **Algeria:** After the initial excitement of January-February, there was very little coverage on domestic outlets, apart from one report by Kevin Connolly on Today at the end of May.
- **Morocco:** King Mohammed's success in pre-empting large-scale revolt through moderate reform was only minimally reported, and for the domestic audience it was not really analysed at all.
- **Jordan:** A similar observation can be made about King Abdullah. There was some good coverage in January and February, but very little thereafter, once it was clear that the monarchy was unlikely to fall.
- **Saudi Arabia** is also a very difficult country to cover, because of the limited access for foreign journalists. But it is of enormous regional and global importance, and should be a major subject of investigation by Western media in general. After a couple of excellent Newsnight reports by Sue Lloyd Roberts in March, the BBC should surely have taken a more intense and sustained interest in both its foreign relations and its domestic affairs.
- **Iraq, Israel, Palestinians:** Iraq's destiny did not generally fit the "Arab Spring" framework, and inevitably coverage of it diminished as attention was drawn to events further west. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also to some extent "squeezed" or "side-lined", but a range of BBC programmes did make commendable efforts to ensure that it was not forgotten.
- **Rest of the World:** The Content Analysis revealed that BBC reporting of external reactions to the Arab Spring focused overwhelmingly on the UK, US and Western Europe. Russian and Chinese reactions were largely ignored until it became

apparent that they were able and willing to block any Security Council action on Syria that did not take account of the Assad regime's interests; and the attitudes of "emerging" powers such as Brazil, India, South Africa or Indonesia were hardly covered at all.

## General

- Context and Background:** the BBC's domestic output, like most other UK and international media, paid too little attention to the internal affairs of Arab countries, and the detail of their governments' relations with the West, in the years before 2011. Once the uprisings began, however, considerable effort was made to explain their causes and origins, particularly on the BBC website. Audience Research shows that "engaged" audiences do use the website not only for keeping up to date with the latest events but also "to drill down into individual stories and follow up on details". Presenters on radio and television should therefore make an effort to draw the attention of listeners and viewers to this valuable source of information. Increasingly they do so, and it is now being done in a more targeted way, directing the public to particular features on the website rather than issuing generic reminders. But there may, as one senior executive told us, be scope for further "exploring the potential" of these links.
- Source material:** The explosion of "user-generated content", and the fact that for much of the story it was the *only* first-hand source, is what the Arab Spring will be remembered for in media history. With its "UGC Hub" already in place in the newsroom, and its formidable reserves of expertise in the Arabic Service and the Monitoring Service, the BBC was relatively well placed to cope with this, and did so probably as well as any other broadcaster worldwide. 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.
- Diversity of Output:** The BBC is fortunate in having a wide range of outlets – from the website and the 24-hour news channel through current affairs reports and discussion programmes to documentaries, on both TV and radio – which can supplement the brief account of the day's events given on the main televised news bulletins. Many of these outlets make imaginative use of their resources, but – as noted above – there are still some conspicuous gaps left unfilled. In any event, those responsible for TV news bulletins fully accept that the existence of these other outlets does not absolve them from the duty of impartiality – including, as the Editorial Guidelines require, to give a wide range of perspectives and context, and to help the audience "make sense of events". Undoubtedly they do make an effort to do this but, as these bulletins still concentrate on reporting the main events and developments of the day, they generally have little time for contextual pieces.
- Strategic Direction:** Since there seems to be at least a widespread feeling, if not agreement, (a) that there should have been more intensive coverage of Arab countries before the Arab Spring, and (b) that Saudi Arabia, in particular, is still not getting the level of attention that its enormous importance demands, I was led to ask whether these omissions were the result of strategic decisions, and if so, at what level such decisions were taken. I conclude by asking whether the structure and agenda of News Board meetings, and the inputs to them, might need modifying in any way – a matter for the BBC to consider.

