

(00:0) Voiceover – Thank you for downloading this podcast of The Report. In this edition Linda Presley looks at Iranian Softpower in the UK. To find out more about the programme and other BBC podcasts visit the BBC Radio 4 website.

(00:15) Men chanting and screaming

(00:19) Linda Presley: The storming of the British embassy in Tehran last month brought relations between the UK and Iran to a new low. In response all Iranian diplomats were expelled by the Foreign secretary William Hague. But Iran still has a presence here in Britain.

(00:37) Woman 1: I think sometimes Iranian people living in the UK, they see the face of Iranian government really powerful in the UK as well.

(00:46) Linda Presley: And what about Press TV, the satellite TV channel funded by the Iranian Government?

(00:51) Man 1: The people on Press TV, a lot of them are sitting in London. They're not all card carrying Islamists

(00:58) Linda Presley: In the Report this week we explore the influence of Iranian organisations in the UK. Does Iran have soft power in Britain? And if so, what is it trying to do?

(01:16) Linda Presley: If you want to know what the government of Iran is thinking, you probably won't do better than tuning in to Press TV on the sky satellite. And it's here in a bland looking office block in Hanger Lane just off the A40 in West London that a production company called Press TV Ltd is based. Press TV is a glossy English medium channel that comes under the umbrella of Iran's state broadcaster. And it's attracted big name British presenters with a radical hue. Ken Livingstone had a show in the channel until earlier this year. Tony Blair's sister in law Lauren Booth is still there together with Yvonne Ridley and the former MP George Galloway.

(01:55) George Galloway: Welcome to the Real Deal with me George Galloway on Press TV every week in London bringing you the news and views that you just won't get in the corporate media. Shooting from the hip, shooting from the lip as always but you can fire back (fades out)

(02:07) Linda Presley: When it was set up Press TV said that Iran and Shiite Muslims had become the focal point of world propaganda, so the station would do something different. Give western audiences what it called a second eye. It's pro-Palestinian, anti-sanctions against Iran and critical of western and especially American and British Foreign Policy. This London office is a separate limited company that sells programmes to Iran, mainly talk shows. The Tehran office produces most of the news and documentaries. But to the UK the channel's come under scrutiny, its commitment to fairness has been questioned in particular as a result of its coverage of the disputed presidential election in Iran in 2009

(02:51) Men screaming and chanting

(02:54) Linda Presley: In June of that year channel 4 news aired a news item on the demonstrations that followed the election. Mazia Bahari, a journalist and film maker contributed some of the footage. Six days later there was a knock on his door in Tehran.

(03:09) Mazia Bahari: The morning of the 21st of June, four revolutionary guards, members, they raided my mother's house, they handcuffed me, blindfolded and took me to Evin prison which is the most notorious prison in Iran. They took off my blindfold and told me that you're charged with espionage for British mi6, for Israeli Mossad, for American CIA and Newsweek.

(03:35) Linda Presley: While Mazia Bahari was in Prison, Press TV aired a report claiming the western media's coverage of the demonstrations was biased. They included footage of the channel 4 reporter's evidence and crucially a short clip of Mazia Bahari recorded while he was detained. This is it

(03:50) Mazia Bahari: I sent a report about the attack against the....uh....base, the military base of basij to (another man?) Channel 4 news as well as Newsweek magazine.

(04:06) Linda Presley: Now what's that like watching that clip of you there?

(04:09) Mazia Bahari: well it brings back a lot of painful memories, one night they blindfolded me, they took me out of my solitary confinement, they took me to an interrogation room. One person came in who sounded more senior than my usual interrogator and then he told me that Mr Bahari you're charged with espionage, you're guilty until proven innocent and this investigation can take about six years and after six years we can let you go or we can execute you, and then, as if he was talking about a fly, said that most probably we will execute you. And then I said what is the way out of this situation, he said you can do a television interview

(04:53) Linda Presley: So what was the setup in that room, who was asking the questions?

(04:57) Mazia Bahari: My interrogators BUT he wrote that scenario and the scenario was divided in to questions and answers. The reporters were supposed to ask the questions I was supposed to give the answers. So we were basically reading from the same sheet

(05: 14) Linda Presley: Mazia Bahari wasn't released after that interview, he spent 118 days in jail in Iran. Back in the UK he complained to the broadcasting regulator Ofcom about Press TV. He claimed the airing of the interview recorded while he was in prison under duress had breached the regulators rules on fairness and privacy. Ofcom upheld his complaint, described it as a very serious case and fined the channel 100,000 pounds. We wanted to ask the channel about the Mazia Bahari case but neither Press TV Ltd in London nor Press TV international wanted to talk to us. Nor could we persuade George Galloway or Yvonne Ridley to record an interview. Farouq Bajwa, a solicitor for the channel was authorised to speak

(05:59) Farouq Bajwa: Of course they argue the interview was done voluntarily, that is something I'm sure they believe but I think Press TV obviously realised that interviewing prisoners while they were under arrest was never an ideal thing to do. Although the fine is large I believe it to be the largest ever given by Ofcom, I believe its something that Press TV can live with but I think it may help reinforce the image amongst Press TV supporters that I think Ofcom is treating Press TV more harshly than other news channels.

(06:28) Linda Presley: But the charges were very serious weren't they, that they'd omitted material facts i.e they didn't say that Mazia Bahari was in prison and that they didn't obtain his consent

(06:38) Farouq Bajwa: They are serious. Lets put this in context in the last few years. You've seen Saddam Hussein being paraded by the world media after being arrested and as recently as the Colonel Gaddafi incident, we see him being lynched and practically his death being shown on television. I'm not justifying what Press TV did. I think in the context of the last five years it wasn't the worst thing we've seen on TV

(06:59) Linda Presley: something else emerged during Ofcom's investigation. It was clear that Press TV Ltd in London doesn't actually control station output, it's Press TV international in Tehran that does, a further breach of regulations because the Ofcom license is held in London. So Press TV has until the 6th of January to transfer the license to Tehran or bring editorial control to the UK. We were told by one insider if the London office was making the decisions that clip with Mazia Bahari would never have aired.

Break

(07:33) Linda Presley : Press TV was given the go ahead by the administration of President Ahmedinejad and began to air in 2007. This, given the President's foreign policy might be seen as something of a paradox, Anoush Ehteshami is a professor of the school of government and international affairs at the University of Durham

(07:52) Anoush: the Khatami administration has been quite keen to build dialogue to develop cultural links than develop closer substantive diplomatic relations. In 2005 Ahmedinejad came to power to end all that. He saw that as creeping westernisation as wanting to rebuild bridges as Iran did not want to rebuild as a revolutionary state.

(08:14) Linda Presley: but interesting that it's since President Ahmedinejad came in to power that we've seen the emergence of Press TV?

(08:20) Anoush: That's right, I think that is very interesting because it seems to be a response to BBC Persian and Voice of American Persian.

(08:30) Linda Presley: and as a soft power tool would it be as important to the Iranian government to say its Arabic language station

(08:36) Anoush: I think it will be as equally important as Al Alam which is its Arabic language tool is a very important tool in trying to get its message of the so-called resistance front in the Arab world. Press TV in a sense is an English equivalent to that operation

(08:52) Linda Presley: Sso whose watching? Well broadcasting in English, Press TV isn't aimed at the ex-patriot Iranian community. Many of whom don't support Iran's government. The bulk of the audience are British Muslims, of those who are interested in a radical agenda. When it started in 2007, some journalists were excited at the prospect of a totally new station with very different priorities. Jodisa brow worked as a freelance correspondent for Press TV in Istanbul. We met her in an Iranian cafe in West London where she told us about the first two years at the station.

(09:29) Jodisa Brow: at that time there was a lot of optimism in Tehran and in Washington that there was going to be a new dialogue and I think that came through in the editorial and speaking to Iranians that were part of this project, also I think that were very hopeful that it was going to be some sort of reform within the Iranian media. We were all very very hopeful I mean even to the point where we were told to wear the Islamic headscarf in hijab. Working in Turkey wearing the hijab as a western woman was extremely controversial so they were flexible. So I was able to wear a hat on Iranian television which was quite revolutionary because it has never been done before so then again that was another sign of optimism in me that we were able to somehow challenge this norm in the Islamic republic.

(10:25) Linda Presley: Her hopes began to dissipate at the time of the demonstrations that followed Iran's disputed election of 2009.

(10:32) Jodisa: they did cover some protests but obviously they didn't give it the coverage that the other channels were in terms of the opposition movement and I think that was disappointing to everyone that was working in Press TV because we were expecting Iran to work on itself as well and it failed I think in that regard.

(10:53) Linda Presley: it was after the elections that it seems the British foreign office began to take a close interest in Press TV. Here's one of the US embassy cables released by WikiLeaks...

Her majesty's government is exploring ways to limit the operations of the Islamic republic of Iran's broadcastings Press TV service which operated a large bureau of over 80 staff in London

(11:14) Farouq Bajwa: we know from the WikiLeaks report that in fact that British government has discussed this at the highest levels even with their American counterparts

(11:20) Linda Presley: Farouq Bajwa, solicitor for Press TV

(11:24) Farouq Bajwa: so again to pretend that Press TV is just another channel in the same way that you may look at French TV channels or the German TV channels just isn't credible. Press TV is obviously viewed differently that means it is obviously watched like a hawk

(11:38) Linda Presley: meanwhile in Turkey, Jodisa Brow continued to file her news pieces for the channel and because she produced them herself, believed that she had editorial control. But with the advent of the Arab Spring this year, she felt the pressure from Tehran. Especially when it came to Syria, Iran's key ally. When eventually Press TV told her to go to the border to do a story, she was told her emphasis should be alleged gunrunning from Turkey into Syria to arm the demonstrators and not refugee stories of government forces firing on them. She refused

(12:12) Jodisa Brow: the next day I switched on the channel and I saw a translator who had worked for me previously on the border reporting the story which was incredibly irresponsible because he had no experience in journalism and this was a critical story. It made me question the quality of other areas of their news gathering because I've never seen that before. It was the first time I'd seen such....

(12:35) Linda Presley: and that was a shock for you?

(12:36) Jodisa: Yeah that was a huge shock for me, i couldn't believe that the channel would go to that extent to get their message out there.

(12:44) Linda Presley: jodisa brow has since left the channel, but support for that message or at least Press TV's freedom to broadcast it comes from some perhaps surprising quarters.

(12:56) Lord Lamont: i think it isn't entirely impartial, I think that is true but on the other hand you do get an insight in to how things appear in an Iranian perspective

(13:03) Linda Presley: Lord Lamont a former chancellor of the exchequer is the chairman of the British Iranian commerce in the UK and director of a company with business interests in Iran.

(13:14) Lord Lemont: for example i saw on Press TV, i was watching it myself the other night and i saw a clip from Newt Gingrich in the presidential republican candidate debates in America where he advocated covert deniable operations including assassinations in Iran. Now I think it's quite important for me to know that that was actually said I never saw it reported in any western media.

(13:43) Linda Presley: and for activists who challenge the west's perceptions of Iran, people like Abbas Edalot from the Campaign against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran the current UK-Iran standoff means access to other british media outlets is limited.

(14:00) Man 2: well its been very difficult in the past few years, we have tried to use british media like the BBC and major newspapers to put across our views but for example after the expulsion of the Iranian diplomats its been very difficult to get any time on the bbc at all. I think its very crucial that we have the Press TV. Demonising Iran is something that the UK has been doing for some time and its now doing again with all the resources in the western media that it has. So obviously in this situation Iran would need to put its side of the argument forward and i think Press TV is trying to fulfil that role

(14:39) Linda Presley: but in Iran too it can also be difficult for citizens to get access to all sides of the argument. Fadeck Saba is head of the BBC's Persian service

(14:49) Fadeck Saba: The Iranians have been jamming bbc asian televisions on and off for the last three years. What has happened now Iran targets certain programmes. A couple of months ago we made a programme about ayatollah khomeini, Irans supreme leader. So what Iranian did was as soon as the programme started they started jamming it on all satellites and as soon as the programme ended the jamming stopped. It is becoming a kind of one might say intelligent jamming because they jam programmes which they think it is most harmful to them.

(15:25) Linda Presley: Mazia Bahari, the journalist who complained to Ofcom about unfair treatment from Press TV and won, thinks that jamming bbc Persian in Iran is a good argument for taking Press TV off the air in the UK.

(15:30) Mazia Bahari: I think it should be banned at least because of reciprocity. People were working for bbc Persian in Iran, they can be charged with espionage, they can be incarcerated for long amounts of time, they can even be executed according to Iranian laws.

(15:57) Linda Presley: but where does the reciprocity argument fit with the freedom of speech argument.

(16:02) Mazia Bahari: when Press TV is infringing on other peoples freedom, when Press TV is endangering other people's lives, then i don't think we can talk about Press freedom anymore.

(16:14) Fadek saba : There is an anomaly here, i sympathise with people who say there must be, something must be done because bbc is not allowed to operate in Iran and Press TV is operating in London near my house in hanger lane in west London and i see them every day and it is so frustrating, anybody can jam anybody, we can easily jam Iran but we never do that we believe in freedom of exPression.

(16:39) Linda Presley: Fadek Saba of the BBc Asian Persian service, but are these two situations analogous, would taking Press TV off air in Britain be equivalent in jamming of the bbc undertaken by the Iranian authorities? Abbas Edolat, the anti-sanctions activist doesn't think so

(16:57) Abbas: well Iranian authorities see themselves in a state of siege surrounded by US military bases that on a daily basis threatens with a military attack there are covert operations covert operations in Iran so none of these things exist in the uk or in the united states by Iran so its not an equal situation from both sides. The BBC Persian i think has got the view of the west. We have to ask ourselves why when a lot of foreign language programmes the bbc were shut down, the Persian service, the Arabic service were launched obviously this has got a political agenda i think and Iranians are very sensitive to that.

(17:47) Maseeh Ali Nejad: My name is Maseeh Ali Nejad i'm an Iranian journalist. Just before the election my car got vandalised in front of my house I thought its quite dangerous for me to stay in Iran because I didn't feel safe there but now I feel guilty.

(18:05) Linda Presley: that you're here instead

(18:06) yeah because i'm safe here but all my colleagues got arrested in Iran and even ordinary people they got shot.

(18:15) Linda Presley: Maseeh Ali nehad worked as a parliamentary journalist in Tehran until she came to the UK in 2009. She's suspicious of organisations in the UK that have direct links to the Iranian government, a shia Islamic republic.

(18:30) Man speaking on a minbar

(18:34) Linda presley: there are thousands of shia Muslims in London. On the day of ashura, one of the holiest days in the shia calendar Iranians march with Lebanese, Iraqis and Afghans to remember the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the prophet Muhammed. Maseeh ali nejad and others we spoke to believe that the Iranian government uses religious centres to promote its politics. The one that concerns her most is the Islamic centre of England, west London. Its run by Mr Muezi, the representative in the UK of Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic republic of Iran.

(19:09) Maseeh: i strongly believe that the Islamic centre is an unofficial embassy in the uk. Its another arms of the government here. For example they manage a lot of religious community and when they invite people for religious ceremony they influence them politically aswell. For Ramadan they invited a lot of Iranians from the uk for a special ceremony and when you go there instead of praying for respecting their own political opinion they start to pray for their own supreme leader.

(19:44) Linda Presley: but that's not illegal

(19:45) Maseeh: of course it's not illegal so that's why i'm saying why British government close down the embassy which was just a help for ordinary people but the Islamic centre and the other governmental organisations still active here?

(20:01) Linda Presley: Mr Muezi didn't want to talk to The Report but he did give us a statement

The Islamic centre of England is a religious and cultural centre registered as a charity in the United Kingdom. Our aim is to support the Muslim community in the uk for services such as spiritual lecturers and classes, conferences and seminars on various religious and inter-faith issues, daily prayers providing family counselling and publishing religious books and magazines for the community.

(20:30) Linda Presley: it isn't just Iranian shia muslims that go to the Islamic centre of England. Michael Acksworthy the director of Exeter university'' centre for Persian and Iranian studies believes there are geopolitical factors at play at Britain too

(20:44) Michael: i think there's another way in which the UK is important for Iran and the Iranian religious groups and also the Iranian regime nowadays and that is as a place that is important for international Muslim culture international exchange of ideas among muslims. Saudi Arabia and Iran are rivals regionally in the middle east but they're also rivals in the religious space of islam as the preeminent states of sunni islam and of shia islam respectively.

(21:20) Linda Presley: so regardless of the state of diplomatic relations between the uk and Iran, Iran would still see it as important as having representation here in London?

(21:30) Michael: yes because London is important in that wider debate and important as where they can put their views across.

(21:35) Linda Presley: so Iran is competing in a market of ideas here in the UK. And arguably so too is the Islamic Human Rights Commission, an influential organisation with consultative status in the UN. Fazal Hawami, an Iranian Kurdish commentator who's made complaints against Press TV also has the IHRC in his sights.

(21:57) Fazal: Last year on the 9th of May 2010, 5 people were executed in Tehran in Evin prison. One of these people who was executed was a teacher and an activist. I tried to get Islamic Human Rights Commission to issue a statement. I get in touch with them i call them up i email them i'm in touch with them for about three months. Essentially they said we have an organisation, a human rights organisation in Iran, ask them to investigate this issue and they'll get back to you. But they never got back to me, they dropped it.

(22:27) Linda Presley: and so what do you suspect is going on here then?

(22:31) Fazal: I believe that Islamic Human Rights Commission has a strong links with Iran. i haven't seen any condemnations any Press releases about the executions of people in Iran

(21:42) Linda Presley: we wanted to interview someone from the Islamic Human Rights Commission, instead they gave us a statement

Unfortunately we can't take every case and cause and like other human rights organisations we have to prioritize, the IHRC believes that all countries have human rights issues and that the Islamic republic of Iran is not an exception to this. However we believe its human rights record is better than other countries in the region. And we've noted this publicly.

(23:08) Linda Presley: Fazal Hawami isn't alone in questioning the priorities of the IHRC. Last year an Iranian green movement activist tackled the head of the commission, also an Iranian, Massoud Shadjareh in London and video'd the exchange

(23:23) Iranian activist: Massoud one question, what about the oppression of the Iranian protestors in Iran, do you stand against that or are you for that?

(23:31) Massoud: I don't know what you are talking about, we are talking about all the....

(23:35) activist: what about the protestors, the peaceful protestors in Iran who are being oppressed by brutal tactics. Torture, rape, have you got any words to say about that?

(23:44) Massoud: i don't know what you're talking about

(23:47) Linda Presley: and in response to this video clip, this is what the IHRC told us

Mr Shadjareh did not want to engage with someone approached from a counter rally, engaged in racist chanting and abuse. And therefore dismissed the protestor with these answers.

(24:02) Linda Presley: the exiled journalist maseeh ali nejad told us she's in contact with families in Iran whose relatives experienced what she describes as brutal treatment at the hands of government forces. But even here in the UK she doesn't think all Iranians feel safe.

(24:18) Maseeh: i think sometimes the Iranian people living in the UK they lose their hope because they see the face of Iranian government really powerful in the UK as well. When they leave Iran and when they see themselves in a, you know, more free country but they see the face of Iranian government anywhere.

(24:37) Linda Presley: some people listening to you might think that because of your particular story that your living here now in exile in the UK, that you might be a bit paranoid about the power and influence that the Iranian authorities have here.

(24:55) Maseeh: i have been working as a journalist for ten years, yes there might be some people might think that i might be a bit paranoid but i have to say that i talk with a lot of Iranian who lives here and what i see is just huge contradiction in Iranian policy. They just want to use the freedom in the UK to silence the voice of Iranian people inside.

(25:17) Linda Presley: in the course of making this edition of the report, we spoke to people who wouldn't be interviewed because they feared reprisals against family living in Iran or were worried their professional contacts would be jeopardized. We also talked to British diplomats uneasy about British organisations here in the UK with direct links to the Iranian government. Especially as now that there are effectively no British institutions operational in Tehran. But there are still some attempts to keep the lines of communications open.

(25:51) John curtis: well we're in the british museum, my name is john Curtis i'm the keeper of special middle east projects here at the british museum and we're just moving in to the Iran gallery and what we we're going to look at is the cyrus cylinder

(26:07) Linda Presley: and they recently its very recently returned from Iran i believe?

(26:09) John: it came back from Iran on april, was there on exhibition, since the previous September

(26:16) Linda Presley: and here it is

(26:17) John: here is the cylinder and what it is a barrel shaped clay cylinder inscribed in Babylonian cuniphorn. This cylinder is sometimes called the first bill of human rights thats become really an icon for Iranians

(26:34) Linda: i mean it must be quite difficult for you juggling the politics at a time like this

(26:38) John: well we believe that it is hugely important to maintain a cultural dialogue with colleagues are in the national museum and others. We'd try not to let politics interfere with that

(26:51) Linda: and dialogue believes Professor Ehteshaami at Durham University is important at a time of diplomatic relations between the uk and Iran are buried in the deep freeze.

(27:03) Ehteshaami: the way that you know the dialogue is securitizing indicates to me that we're still a long way from climbing up the ladder of confidence rather than going down it. And given that now we have very little contact with Iran, the danger is that the dialogue of the death will mean that both parties will assume the worst about the other one and act accordingly.

(27:26) Linda: so while we have these institutions like Press TV, like the Islamic centre for England, thats better than not having them at all?

(27:33) ehteshaam: i think it is better, i think that it atleast shows that Britain remains open to interaction of any sorts so long as it is within legal parameters than having absolutely nothing at all.