

## Written evidence submitted by BBC World Service (MENA0069)

### Introduction

1. The BBC's global news services (including the World Service, the News channel, BBC.com and BBC Media Action) are available online, via radio and television reaching 411m people around the world every week<sup>1</sup> across 43<sup>2</sup> languages including English, more than any other international broadcaster. The BBC is the world's most trusted and best-known international news broadcaster, with CNN its nearest competitor<sup>3</sup> as consistently shown by independent research.
2. The World Service is an essential part of the BBC's global news offer: committed to accurate, impartial, and independent news. It makes a global contribution to the BBC's Mission to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality, and distinctive output and services which inform, educate, and entertain. The BBC has the global insight and expertise to give audiences a truly international news service, with journalists and supporting staff based around the world.
3. Of the 42 language services which operate under the World Service licence, TV and digital services in Arabic (our second largest language service) and Persian are aimed at the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as well as digital and radio services in English, and a number of other language services are also accessible in the region via digital including Turkish, Pashto, Dari, Oromo, Igbo, Tigrinya and Uzbek.
4. The BBC has a long history of covering the MENA region, and plays an essential role in helping to explain events to audiences.
5. Since the start of the conflict in Israel/Gaza, audiences have been coming to the BBC for information they can trust, expert analysis they can rely on and first-hand on the ground reporting. Digital reach across language services, World Service English and bbc.com saw a 56% uplift on average weekly reach in the second week of October. The BBC's editorial independence is key to maintaining audience trust and therefore reach.
6. There are significant media freedom challenges in the region including the persecution of journalists (such as Iran's targeting of BBC Persian staff) and tight media controls have been put in place by some state authorities. Meanwhile, external state actors have a growing media presence in some countries.
7. This evidence seeks to provide useful background information to the Committee's inquiry in terms of the World Service offer and impact in the region, and challenges faced with regards to the media environment.

### Media environment

8. The BBC's role has never been more crucial. Events over the last year have repeatedly illustrated the danger that disinformation and constraints on media freedom pose to societies and democracies worldwide, from the current situation in Israel/Gaza, the protests and their suppression in Iran to the information war in Russia and Ukraine. According to the

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Global Audience Measurement (GAM) 2023

<sup>2</sup> 42 languages operate under the World Service Licence

<sup>3</sup> BBC Global News Brand Tracker conducted by Kantar Media and other independent surveys

latest World Press Freedom Index (WPI)<sup>4</sup>, journalism is completely or partially blocked in over 70% of the 180 countries it ranks, and the situation is ranked as “very serious” in a record 31 countries. This context is very challenging for the World Service, with some services under particular pressure.

9. More than half the countries in the Middle East are classified as having “very serious” press freedom issues. These include Iran which has intensified its persecution of journalists – including BBC Persian staff and other journalists based outside the country - following Mahsa Amini’s death in police custody, Saudi Arabia and Egypt where journalists have been sentenced to long prison terms and Syria where journalists have been taken hostage. In North Africa conditions for journalists have also deteriorated with press freedoms recently reversed in Tunisia, a new much-criticised media law in Algeria and judicial harassment of journalists in Morocco. In general, the region’s media are tightly controlled by relevant state authorities, including the main pan-Arab TV channels. Social media usage on smartphones is high and platform preferences vary from country to country.
10. At the time of writing at least 24 journalists<sup>5</sup> have been killed in the region as a result of the war in Israel/Gaza including Reuters cameraman, Issam Abdallah, in Southern Lebanon.
11. State-funded media organisations are establishing a growing presence in some markets. China’s CGTN and Russia’s RT continue to invest heavily in external news media operations<sup>6</sup>. Despite generally having lower trust levels than for the BBC, CGTN and RT have both seen faster growth among influential audiences over the past three years. RT is the leading international provider in Syria. Recent research has revealed that RT is now the most trusted international news provider in Egypt<sup>7</sup> and it is a key digital player in the market<sup>8</sup>. CGTN has sizeable audiences in several African nations<sup>9</sup>.
12. Against this backdrop, the BBC World Service is unique: trusted throughout the world to report without fear or favour from the toughest geographies and the hardest political climates.
13. It is the UK’s most-salient cultural export, with 76% awareness among influential global users across the world.<sup>10</sup>
14. BBC World Service is chiefly funded by the UK Licence Fee. This is supplemented by grant-in-aid funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and in March 2023, the FCDO announced a one-off additional payment of £20m over two years to the World Service. The additional funding is welcome and will help mitigate some of the financial pressures. It is conditional on the World Service maintaining all 42 languages services, with no closures of any entire languages service, or announcements of such closures, taking place in 2023/24 or 2024/25. However, the cost of digital investment remains high at a time of high inflation, soaring costs, and a challenging Licence Fee settlement.

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<sup>4</sup> RSF [2023 World Press Freedom Index](#)

<sup>5</sup> At least 24 journalists are among the more than 6,000 people who have been killed in the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, according to the latest tally released by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

<sup>6</sup> Sources include [The Journal of International Communication](#) and [Statista](#)

<sup>7</sup> BBC nationally representative survey, Egypt 2023

<sup>8</sup> SimilarWeb

<sup>9</sup> GAM 2023

<sup>10</sup> Tapestry Research

15. The BBC have said there is a strong case for more investment over the coming years, so that it can grow a World Service that is digital-first, competitive and continues to deliver value for audiences around the world.

### The BBC in Middle East & North Africa

16. The BBC offers continuous digital services in Arabic and Persian as well as Arabic TV (24/7) and Persian TV on its own channels. BBC World Service (WS) English is also available on radio and online via [bbc.com/worldservice](https://www.bbc.com/worldservice). BBC Learning English uses international broadcasting to teach English via its website [bbclearningenglish.com](https://www.bbclearningenglish.com).
17. Other BBC digital language services accessed by audiences in the MENA region include Pashto and Dari (with audiences in Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE), Oromo (in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Yemen), Tigrinya (in Saudi Arabia and Sudan), Uzbek (in Iran), Turkish (in Iran), Azerbaijani (in Iran) and Igbo (in UAE).
18. The BBC has correspondents on location in more countries than any other broadcaster including a significant presence in the region with offices in Amman, Jerusalem, Beirut, Cairo, Gaza, Ramallah, Baghdad, Tunis and Istanbul. BBC Arabic TV programmes are produced from studios in London, Cairo and Beirut and BBC Arabic has its own correspondents posted around the world.

### BBC News Arabic

19. BBC Arabic is the BBC's oldest language service and is highly valued by audiences across the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf for its independent and accurate reporting. The service has a long and distinguished reputation for reporting without fear or favour.
20. The service is well-placed to provide expertise and specialist knowledge across the Middle East, North Africa and surrounding region and reaches a weekly audience of 32.2m. Top markets are in Yemen (4.6m), Saudi Arabia (3.4m), Iraq (3m), Egypt (3m), and Algeria (2.6m)<sup>11</sup>.
21. Popular TV programmes include: *BBC Trending* (discussion of stories trending on social media); *BBC XTRA* (a TV and digital programme focusing on stories from young people's lives); *Talking Point* (bi-media interactive show); *Newshour*; *Hard Talk* (a flagship interview programme); *Dunyana* (women discussing issues pertaining to the Arab world); and the daily news programme *World at One*. It also produces regular podcasts such as *Full Picture* (bi-weekly analysis on one political issue), and *Myths* (Reality Check).
22. BBC Arabic has produced notable and award-winning investigative journalism using open source material and achieving real impact. Documentaries produced by the service have included: *Under Poisoned Skies*, which demonstrated how illegal gas flaring is raising the risk of childhood cancers and led to Iraq's Oil Ministry pressuring international oil companies for an end to the practice in the region. The documentary has won numerous awards including the Royal Television Society Award (International Current Affairs) earlier this year. BBC Arabic won the same award in 2021 for its investigation into the abuse of children at Islamic schools in Sudan, *The Schools that Chain Boys* and has won three Emmys in the last three

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<sup>11</sup> GAM 2023

years for other investigations. A BBC Arabic [investigation](#) into toxic wastewater dumping in the Red Sea was referenced by the *New York Times* and *National Geographic*, and a plan to announce a new marine protection area by the Egyptian government was re-tabled. [Syria: Addicted to Captagon](#) used previously unseen evidence, WhatsApp conversations, and insider testimony to show how people at the top of Syria's political and social hierarchy are benefiting from an illegal industry worth many billions of dollars a year. The story was given extra urgency by Syria's readmission to the Arab League "on condition that it take steps to control the drug trade". These documentaries also featured on the BBC News channel, iPlayer and across News bulletins.

23. In addition to the website [bbc.com/arabic](#), the service's digital platforms include Facebook, Twitter/X and YouTube.

### BBC News Persian

24. BBC Persian is available online via [bbc.com/persian](#) and on TV, as well as social media channels. Its weekly reach is 19.2m (up 2% on the previous year<sup>12</sup>), with top markets in Iran (14.8m) and Afghanistan (2m). It has followers on Facebook, Instagram (more than 19m), Telegram messenger service and on Twitter/X.
25. Broadcast from the BBC studios in London, BBC Persian TV is available via satellite, is streamed live online (and is available on demand) on [bbc.com/persian](#) and YouTube. It also has journalists in key locations such as Beirut, Dushanbe, Istanbul, Kabul, New York and Washington.
26. As well as news and analysis, the channel delivers a wide range of original factual programmes, strands on music, arts and culture, science and technology, and sport including debate programme *Pargar* (Compass), technology guide *BBC Click*, interview programme *Be-ebaarat-eh Digar*, arts and culture review *Tamashaa* (Spectacle); *Khabarnegaaraan* (Reporters, where BBC journalists from around the world bring their personal perspective and insight to the week's news), *Aparat* (Documentary Showcase of the best Iranian, Afghan and Tajik documentary films); and health and wellbeing programme *37 Darajeh* (37 Degrees).

### BBC Persian harassment update

27. The BBC continues with its advocacy work at an international level to raise the issue of the harassment and intimidation of its Iranian staff working at the BBC Persian Service. Iran has been actively targeting staff and their family members in Iran since 2009. The targeting – which has included a widespread national security criminal investigation, asset freezes, death threats, arbitrary arrest and detention, travel bans, disinformation and online attacks – is a deliberate attempt to intimidate them into stopping their work as journalists for the BBC. The affected group of staff includes Iranian nationals who are also dual nationals: most are dual UK/Iranian nationals, but the group also includes other EU nationals, including dual nationals from France and Germany, and nationals of Australia, Canada and the United States of America.
28. This intimidation escalated in 2017 and has continued ever since, escalating to unprecedented level in 2022 and early 2023 in the wake of the protests in Iran. For example,

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<sup>12</sup> GAM 2023

Iranian government officials have blamed the BBC's reporting for the unrest and protests and in October 2022, the BBC was placed on the list of sanctioned organisations for 'or supporting and instigating terrorism, violence, hate-mongering and human rights abuse'. A senior member of the judiciary has threatened to place the BBC on the list of terrorist organisations because of its reporting on the protests.

29. The BBC met with the recently appointed UN International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran which, in July 2023, confirmed that its investigation into human rights violations in Iran will include the targeting and harassment of journalists inside and outside of Iran, as well as the harassment of their families in Iran. The BBC has submitted evidence to the inquiry<sup>13</sup>.
30. Security threats to particular individuals and to Iranian journalists based in London as a whole have increased over the last 18 months and the BBC continues to support and advise its staff on personal safety and reviews the situation very regularly. Stories of threats to the livelihoods of relatives in Iran persist as the Iranian authorities continue to put pressure on family members to encourage journalists to stop working for the BBC.

### Israel/Gaza coverage

31. Output teams have delivered hours of extra coverage across all services, with live teams in Gaza, The West Bank, Southern Israel, Jerusalem, Southern Lebanon, Cairo and across the region providing invaluable on-the-ground reporting and insights; BBC Arabic maintained rolling TV programming and extended flagship live programmes, including live editions of *Talking Point* daily; and there were extra editions of WS English programmes and the *Global News Podcast*, while online there has been growth across services.
32. BBC News (World Service + bbc.com) saw a total digital reach of 211m people in the week of October 9 and World Service Languages saw a total digital reach of 155m people in the same week. This represents a +56% uplift on average weekly reach in 2023 and also marks the biggest week for BBC News and WS Languages digital reach so far in 2023.
33. In addition, and as we had done for Sudan, BBC Arabic is introducing an emergency radio service for Gaza in response to the conflict<sup>14</sup>. *Gaza Daily* will be providing listeners with the latest information and developments as well as safety advice on where to access shelter, food and water supplies. It will be produced in Cairo and London and broadcast on medium wave, initially offering one programme a day increasing to two daily. The World Service has a history of responding to emergency situations globally.
34. The conflict has highlighted the hugely important and unique role of BBC Arabic in the region as one of the few media organisations reporting on both the unfolding situation affecting civilians in Gaza, as well as stories of the families in Southern Israel.
35. There has been exceptional reporting on the ground under incredibly challenging circumstances. BBC journalists based in Gaza are working under extremely difficult conditions, with no place of safety, as rockets continue to fall around them. Most of them (at the time of writing) have moved with their families from Gaza City and are living in makeshift accommodation.

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<sup>13</sup> [BBC Media Centre - UN International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran confirms investigation into the threats faced by BBC News Persian journalists and their families](#)

<sup>14</sup> [BBC Media Centre - World Service announces emergency radio service for Gaza](#)

36. This extraordinarily personal [piece](#) showing a BBC Arabic correspondent and camera operators filming in Gaza, and discovering their own neighbours and relatives are among those injured and killed in Israeli airstrikes, has had millions of views online. They were speaking to survivors in Al-Shifa Hospital when victims started being brought in to be treated. Many broadcast and online outlets ran the piece internationally and it was showcased by CNN.
37. BBC Monitoring [analysed scores of social media posts](#) about the war which show misinformation is rampant. Many videos completely unrelated to the conflict have been passed off as war footage between Israel and Hamas using video games or even pictures of football celebrations in Algeria.
38. Special programming across World Service English demonstrates the depth of expertise and range of programming available to global audiences through the service. The *Global News Podcast* linked up with new pop up podcast [The Conflict](#) presented by correspondents Lyse Doucet and Jeremy Bowen for special editions on Israel/Gaza; there was a special documentary podcast presented by Katya Adler [Understand: Israel and the Palestinians](#); *HARDtalk* interviewed the former Israeli PM Ehud Barak among others, including the head of the Palestinian mission in London Husam Zomlot; and OS spoke to both [Gazan](#) and [Israeli](#) families who have lost loved ones in the conflict.

#### Wider coverage of the region

39. Coverage of the devastating floods in Libya and earthquake in Morocco showed the value of World Service Languages and BBC Monitoring as sources of insight and expertise and World Service teams led coverage on BBC Verify<sup>15</sup> to get as full a picture as possible of the situation on the ground in both countries. Language service teams worked to sustain the live output with eye witness voices and exclusive pictures which were shared across BBC News, one such example is this piece on [the baby delivered just before the quake](#), which made it to the BBC News front page. On WS English, *Newsday* was presented daily from Marrakesh and reported into *Newshour*, OS and the *Newsroom*.
40. The floods in Libya were not just logistically difficult but complex to cover, as the political situation in Libya remains volatile. BBC Monitoring's MENA team appeared with BBC correspondents on the News Channel and other programmes, bringing focus and clarity to the discussion. Daily monitoring of Libyan affairs offered particular insight into the political complexity of that country. Meanwhile, BBC Arabic focused on extensive verification of the satellite imagery on the floods which was used across BBC News, and later in this [piece](#). *Newshour* broadcast the first interview with a local official in Derna who described catastrophic scenes in the city. The digital version of the interview [received](#) more than 2m page reads.
41. In September 2023, BBC Persian marked the one year anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody and the unrest that followed. A year on, the team looked again at media restriction and mass arrests of journalists, protest music and internet restrictions, and the cost to countless lives in the process. Content explored the impact of the protests and

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<sup>15</sup> Expert teams working across BBC on tackling disinformation, tracking images and claims were brought together in May 2023 with the launch of [BBC Verify](#).

their lasting effects – particularly on women and the young, with exclusive interviews, investigative reports, and compelling narratives. Examples include: *“She always wanted to become a doctor...”* an interview with the mother of Mahsa Amini, and an interview with an Iranian security force member who chose not to fire on the protesters: *A Soldier’s Defiance*.

### Distribution changes

42. The BBC World Service has previously outlined plans to accelerate its digital offering and increase impact with audiences around the globe. This was as a result of changing audience needs around the world - with more people accessing news digitally - and a challenging financial climate.
43. BBC radio services in Arabic and Persian ended in January and March 2023 respectively, as part of this programme. These were tough choices, and audience impact was very carefully considered so that most audiences still had access to BBC services and content following the changes. In Iran, prior to the changes, 1% of the BBC’s total weekly audience accessed BBC news solely via radio – the other 99% used BBC Persian on TV and online. For BBC Arabic, 5% of the total audience used BBC radio only. The BBC is focusing on and investing in building audio and other digital capability to replace radio in these languages and the Persian and Arabic TV channels will continue, with more investment, to maximise their impact in the market.
44. In addition to the Gaza emergency service mentioned above, an emergency radio service for Sudan<sup>16</sup> was launched in response to the conflict there in May 2023. The BBC Arabic radio service broadcast twice daily on short wave in Sudan (also available online and across social media) featured eye witness accounts, vital information on how to access essential supplies and services, as well as analysis from voices inside and outside the country. The BBC remains committed to acting swiftly in unique circumstances, ensuring that it is able to share urgent news and information to those in need.

### BBC Monitoring

45. BBC Monitoring (BBCM) monitors open-source media including broadcast, press and online outlets, along with various social media platforms popular in the region. It has access to thousands of TV channels broadcasting to the region, as picked up by its signals-receiving stations in the UK, Cyprus and elsewhere.
46. In the MENA region, BBCM covers the activities of disruptive regional players such as Iran and those of non-state armed groups present in various countries, and social factors that may trigger civil unrest and political insecurity. It explains how such threats are reported, and sometimes amplified, by media activity.
47. In addition, BBCM provides output relevant to those interested in the MENA area from neighbouring countries and regions, including Turkey, Sudan and the Horn of Africa, and the South Caucasus. Monitoring of Moscow’s and Beijing’s views on the region is provided by BBCM’s Russia and China teams, as well as by their MENA colleagues. A specialist unit, the Jihadist Media Team, focuses exclusively on the online activities of al-Qaeda, so-called Islamic State (Daesh) and affiliated groups, and has become a recognised centre of excellence.

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<sup>16</sup> [BBC Media Centre - BBCWS launches emergency radio service for Sudan](#)

48. BBCM is partially funded by the Licence Fee with some additional commercial income. It's baseline output is freely available to its users in the BBC, HMG and Parliament via its website<sup>17</sup>. Access to the website is also sold to a wide variety of clients (including foreign governments and the corporate, NGO and academic sectors).

### BBC Media Action

49. BBC Media Action's<sup>18</sup> work across the region has strengthened and supported local broadcasters to bridge divides, improve political participation and accountability, and engage young people on issues that matter.
50. From a base in Tunis, BBC Media Action works in Tunisia, Libya and Algeria. In Libya, their social media platform *El Kul* (For Everyone) has been running for nearly a decade; it now reaches over 25% of Libyan adults and is the largest independent media platform of its kind. It helps foster social cohesion, combat disinformation and encourage inclusion; in response to the recent floods, *El Kul* offered practical lifeline information for survivors, their families and host communities – including information on how to protect themselves against contaminated flood water and avoid damaged buildings.
51. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Media Action provided Lifeline training for media outlets in the region to help them support audiences with life-saving information - including how to protect themselves and adapt their livelihoods, and addressing misinformation around the virus and COVID-19 vaccines.
52. BBC Media Action continues to work to combat rising mis- and disinformation in North Africa, working with the University of Cambridge to pilot innovative new 'pre-bunking' approaches to sensitise audiences in Tunisia and Libya to the manipulation techniques commonly used in false and deliberately misleading information, and to help stem the spread.

### Media freedom challenges in the region

53. In addition to the ongoing harassment and intimidation of BBC Persian staff and their families described above, BBC Persian online services are blocked in Iran - access is only possible with the use of a circumvention application - and harmful satellite interference occasionally affects reception of Persian TV including at the time of the anniversary of the Mahsa Amini protests in Iran.
54. The BBC is working closely with national governments across the MENA region to ensure compliance as necessary. Particular risk lies in Egypt, where authorities are increasingly hostile to foreign media including the BBC, and Lebanon where the economic downturn and banking crisis are impacting on operations.
55. In June this year Syria's information ministry cancelled the accreditation of two local BBC journalists without explanation following the broadcast of BBC Arabic documentary *Addicted to Captagon*. In response the BBC issued a statement reiterating BBC Arabic's

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<sup>17</sup> <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/> - BBC Media Action is the BBC's international charity and is not funded by the Licence Fee.



commitment to impartial independent journalism and reassuring that it would continue to serve audiences in this way across the Arabic-speaking world.

## Conclusion

56. The BBC's steadfast provision of impartial news and information continues to be highly valued by its audiences who turn to it in their millions, particularly at times of crisis, as illustrated in recent weeks.
57. Whilst carrying out their work in the region, journalists endure the most extreme conditions, and are often reporting stories whilst dealing with the needs of their families in unimaginable circumstances.
58. The BBC World Service is a trusted and independent voice in a media landscape that often contains misinformation and disinformation, and where external state actors are investing in international broadcasting. A strong well-financed World Service is therefore crucial - the BBC's global news services status as the best-known and most trusted international broadcaster makes it a priceless asset for the UK.

November 2023