

"If people understand each other more, peace might come about as a result of that"

Fran Unsworth is the Director of BBC World Service Group and Deputy Director of News and Current Affairs at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In an exclusive interview with Amitava Kar, Fran Unsworth talks about the future strategies of the BBC and how it maintains the quality of news.

How do you define the BBC's role in the future?
We define our role as providing an international news service which helps people all over the world gain a greater understanding of the world around them. The founding motto of the BBC was: Nation shall speak peace unto nation. That motto stands as well nowadays as it has ever done, probably more so than ever. The idea is if people understand each other more, peace might come about as a result of that.

How is the BBC preparing to reach the target of 500 million audiences by 2021?

We are responding to the huge technological change in the way people are consuming media and are likely to consume media going forward. But interestingly enough, quite a lot of our growth in the last couple of years has been going into vernacular television. I think the power of pictures to tell a story will always be there. And the power of radio to provide argument and discussion will also be there. But people want something else as well. And we have to respond to all those things. But really my objective would be for us to try to launch as many television bulletins and language services as we can afford to do over the course of the next few years. For financial reasons, we had to retreat a bit on how many

language services we provided. I don't want to retreat any further. If anything, I want to expand because I think that is the way to reach our target.

Nowadays there are a lot of international channels to choose from. Why should the audience pick the BBC?

Yes, a lot of nations seem to want their own international news service. The Turks are just about to launch an English-language one, which is going to be partly state-funded and partly privately-funded. This joins the plethora of international TV channels that we now see—Al Jazeera, RT, CCTV, France24, Deutsche Welle, BBC, CNN, the list goes on. Some of them are putting out classic news services and some of them are really there to project their own nation's perspective which has a value in itself. At the BBC we try to provide an international perspective. That is a fundamental difference between the BBC and many of these news providers that are entering the market.

How does the BBC ensure and maintain the quality of its news? What is the evaluation process at the BBC?

If you are going to be a proper public service broadcaster, it is important that you are properly funded and funded in a way that is free



Fran Unsworth PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

from political and commercial pressure. That's not to say you can't take commercial money but they can't influence your agenda. That's a constitutional issue for you—that's

about how you are regulated, how you are set up, what your charter says about what you have to do. Fortunately, at the BBC we have got nearly a hundred years of that being the case and that instils a certain sets of ethos and values. And then of course, there is training and constant vigilance. The BBC Trust with independently appointed trustees ensures that we are doing what we say we do. We also have various mechanisms for internal evaluation.

The world saw how the western media fuelled Bush's incursion into Iraq which was based on false claims. How is it that nobody tried to verify those claims?

That's a really good question. If you are asking if the BBC along with quite a lot of other media were too credulous about the claims being made by governments, the answer is yes. The BBC has a duty to report what world leaders say. We also have a duty, however, to examine the veracity of those claims. That didn't happen at that time for a number of reasons. We didn't have access to the sites that the UN inspectors were going to visit. In order to verify that sort of stuff you need a heavy-duty investigative approach to it which wasn't applied at that time—partly because of the inability to do so and partly

because, perhaps, there was some kind of inertia about it. The other point I would make is that daily news is not history. They call it the first draft of history but it's not history. It's what people know about on that day. It's very easy in hindsight to say that the media got it wrong. Because that happens everyday. But things are revised in the light of extra knowledge that then comes along.

How can the BBC help the people of Bangladesh in realising their dreams in the post-MDG period?

That's also a really good question. We should be examining why Bangladesh has done better than many other countries in reaching some of the MDGs. That's a really interesting story. And when the next set of goals is kicked off, we will be giving each goal a significant amount of examination, coverage and exploration.

Would you like to say something to your Bangladeshi audience?

We are very grateful that you continue to listen, watch and read in the numbers that you are, and we very much hope that you continue to do so. We would love to hear from you through social media, through whatever form you would choose to communicate with us, about issues that are of concern to you, so we can reflect that in our output.

IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

From Proxy Sectarian Conflicts to Open Warfare?

HASSAN MNEIMNEH

THE airstrikes undertaken by a Saudi-led coalition against targets in Yemen may usher a new phase in one of the longest, most destructive, and most confused conflicts to affect the Middle East and much of the Muslim world: the Saudi-Iranian confrontation.

Long before the US intervention in Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring in 2011, and the ensuing chaos that threatens regional and international orders, the Middle East had witnessed considerable geo-strategic shifts. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran may have been the most saliently disruptive such event. It toppled a Western ally, introduced Islamism as a viable political force, and, through Tehran's new bellicose rhetoric and military reach, threatened global economic stability. The new Islamic Republic was however contained by both regional and international actors — through a devastating eight-year war with Iraq, and a sanctions regimen that continues until today. Iran did succeed nonetheless in gaining inroads into the political order of the region through its sponsorship and eventual leadership of the "resistance axis" — state and non-state actors opposed to Israel and the West and committed to a radical resolution of the region's woes, one that openly calls in particular for the eradication of Israel as a colonial outpost. With a pro-Western Iran now part of the past, Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, assumed the paramount in the "moderation axis", the informal alliance of regional actors espousing a less confrontational pursuit of regional and international accord, one that is responsive to Western economic needs and implicitly accepts Israel as a de facto reality to be accommodated.

The confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia can thus be summarized as an opposition between two approaches, radical and moderate, towards the problems of the Middle East. The ideological and policy differences, however, seem to have faded in what increasingly appears to be a generic competition for influence and hegemony, only to be replaced, in media polemics, with accusations of Sunni versus Shi'i sectarianism.

Much indulgence has recently been expanded in portraying Saudi-Iranian confrontation in essentialised sectarian terms. For detractors of Iran addressing audiences with Sunni sensibilities, the

origin of the enmity is Tehran's aggressive sectarianism, as demonstrated by the ritualized festive celebration of the assassination of Caliph Umar, and the public cursing of the Prophet's wife Aisha. Iran, according to these detractors, is engaged in a stealth religious war against the Sunni world, infiltrating and converting Sunni communities, under the false banner of Muslim unity. The mirror image of these accusations is directed at Saudi Arabia. For its detractors, it is the Saudi religious establishment that is committed to the destruction of the pluralism and diversity of Sunni Islam, imposing itself on communities worldwide, destroying their spiritual heritage, and forcing the application its own austere version of the faith — while condoning and supporting, even if indirectly, violent attacks on Shi'i minorities.

These accusations are faced with official denial and rebuke, in each of Tehran and Riyadh. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have declared themselves committed to Islamic unity and moderation, against sectarianism and intolerance. Both, however, have often been less than charitable with their respective religious minorities. Sunni Iranians are denied the right of congregation in Tehran, while Shi'ite Saudis have to endure the litany of pronouncements by the religious establishment denigrating their practices.

Still, the claims, on the part of the respective political leadership, of efforts at combating discrimination and reigning in on clerics and scholars with a sectarian bent cannot be dismissed as insincere. It is in the fundamental interest of both Saudi Arabia and Iran to contain the volatility and violence that are generated by inflammatory sectarianism. It is, however, also in their distinct advantage to maintain a manageable level of sectarian mobilization, to summon political support domestically, and to realise options for action in their regional conflict.

In each of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain — countries in the Middle East enduring severe levels of internal strife, Saudi Arabia and Iran provide support for opposing sides. The conflicts in these countries may not have originated with the diverging policies of Riyadh and Tehran. They have, however, been transformed into proxy confrontations between the two regional powers.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have instrumentalised sectarian impulses in areas of confrontation. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards

Corps (IRGC) oversees the recruitment and deployment of international Shi'i militias in its support of the Damascus dictatorship against the Syrian uprising, while Saudi Arabia has staunchly resisted the emergence of a (Shi'i-majority) constitutional monarchy in neighbouring Bahrain. In Iraq, Saudi distrust of the Tehran-leaning leadership of the Shi'i majority has contributed to the alienation of Baghdad from its Arab environment, leaving it, counter-productively, with little recourse other than Iran. Across the Middle East, Saudi and Iranian funds, resources, and intelligence services, as well as loosely funded media organizations engaged in political and sectarian rhetoric, have been locked in a high stake competition that has required successive escalations.

With the looming framework agreement between Iran and the US-led P5+1 group, presumably on nuclear restrictions and lifting of economic sanctions, Saudi Arabia's confidence in a US alignment in its favour was eroding. But it was in Yemen, in the Arabian Peninsula itself, that Iran crossed a "red-line", from the Saudi perspective.

With the coup staged in Yemen by its allies, and hints of far-reaching implications for the agreement with the P5+1, Tehran seemed boastful of an imminent victory at the regional scale. The prospect of Iran prevailing is in fact illusory: even if successful in eliminating Saudi influence, Tehran would have to contend with a fierce Sunni radicalism — informed by its own experimentations with Islamism, and would not be able to pacify the region. The feared outcome of allowing Iran to revel in the illusion of victory, from a Saudi perspective, is the empowering of such Sunni radicalism, at the detriment of order and control in Saudi Arabia itself, as well as in adjacent territories.

The Saudi-led operation in Yemen is thus both the Saudi response to excesses on the part of Iran in the low-intensity confrontation that opposes the two regional powers, and a pre-emptive strike against an outburst of Sunni radicalism, enhanced in reaction to Iranian hubris. The war in Yemen, however, is a high stakes gamble: were it to succeed and reverse the effect of the pro-Iranian coup, it would have dealt a severe blow to Iranian gravitas, and would require from Tehran in response another high profile regional action. Were it to fail, it would embolden both Iran to pursue more adventures and Sunni jihadism, now cast as the last best hope against Shi'i expansion-

ism. In Yemen, Riyadh and Tehran are thus engaged in a dangerous exercise with no foreseeable positive outcome, unless the two capitals revert to a real dialogue to address all the dossiers of their enmity. Left to its own dynamics, the confrontation in Yemen will not only lead Saudi Arabia and Iran to open warfare, but will insure that the real victor at the end is radicalism. This is a fact that the leaderships at both sides of the Persian Gulf understand well, but have been willing to ignore in expectation of concessions from the other side.

The irony is that this most dangerous relationship in the Middle East, between Saudi Arabia and

With no objective grounds for fundamental discord on most issues, Riyadh and Tehran, acting in unison, could usher an era of stability and progress in the region. Were their enmity to be transformed to entente, the sought-after peace and unity may become a realistic prospect.

Iran, is also the most promising. With no objective grounds for fundamental discord on most issues, Riyadh and Tehran, acting in unison, could usher an era of stability and progress in the region. Were their enmity to be transformed to entente, the sought-after peace and unity may become a realistic prospect. The pre-requisites for such course are wisdom and vision. In Yemen and across the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran are being thus tested.

The writer is Principal, Middle East Alternatives, Washington DC. (Exclusive to The Daily Star.)

QUOTABLE Quote

"The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

William Shakespeare

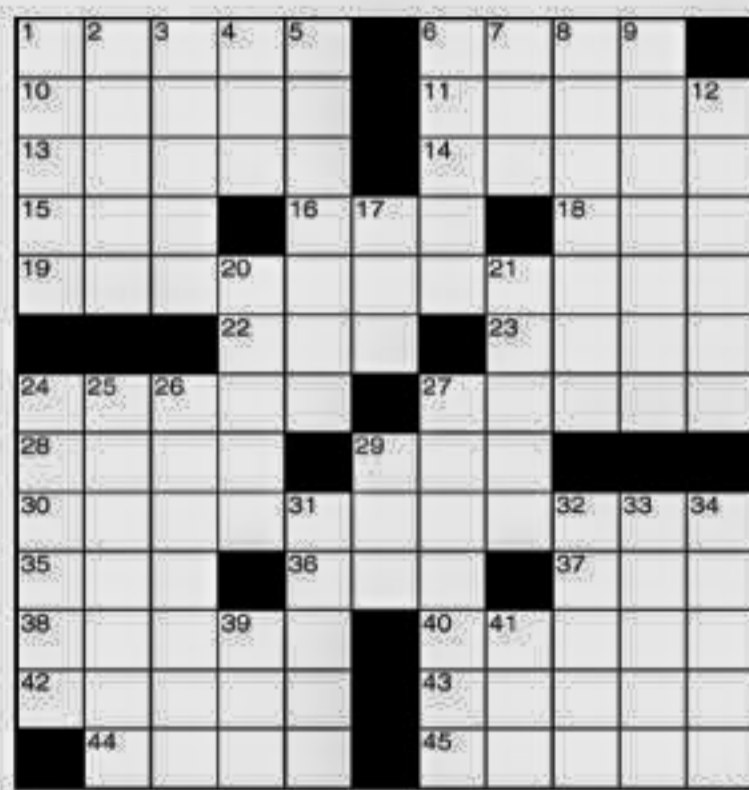
CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 Singers like Ella Fitzgerald
- 6 Mount Olympus group
- 10 Politician Sarah
- 11 Bumbling
- 13 Laughable
- 14 Burton of "Roots"
- 15 Huck's pal
- 16 Finish
- 18 Writer Levin
- 19 Sleep extender
- 22 Spelling contest
- 23 Resting on
- 24 Yawning, perhaps
- 27 Gushes forth
- 28 Son of Zeus
- 29 Gorilla, for example
- 30 Police alerter
- 35 Sock part
- 36 Longing
- 37 Method
- 38 Gladden
- 40 Mirror sight
- 42 Stopwatch button
- 43 More tender
- 44 Vast expanses

DOWN

- 1 Barbecue rods
- 2 Body of law
- 3 Texas landmark
- 4 Light metal
- 5 Reacted to pollen
- 6 Comic Radner
- 7 Start of a count
- 8 Go off course
- 9 Small songbird
- 12 Vagabonds
- 13 Once called
- 17 Past plump
- 20 Jacket flap
- 21 Turkey tool
- 25 Baltimore team
- 26 Set free
- 27 Tijuana tongue
- 29 Had lunch
- 31 Russian refusals
- 32 Not oblivious
- 33 Was furious
- 34 Mike of "Shrek"
- 39 Hot drink
- 41 One of the Stooges



CRYPTOQUOTE

G EGY LJ FLVA LY WFXWXFLXY OX OAP YTEHPF XZ OALYDJ NALVA AP VGY GZZXFS OX QPO GQXP.

-- APYFC S. OAXFPGT

Saturday's Cryptoquote: IF YOU'RE NOT MAKING MISTAKES, THEN YOU'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING. I'M POSITIVE THAT A DOER MAKES MISTAKES. -- JOHN WOODEN

Yesterday's answer



BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



HENRY

by Don Trachte

