

Free Speech “Marked for Death”: Lebanon’s Al Manar TV Targeted

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Global Research, July 17, 2006

17 July 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO](#)

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After years of asymmetric attacks on the First Amendment- assassinating journalists, surveilling dissent, and censoring the free flow of information- the Democracy Mukhabarat rules. Using national security to prohibit scrutiny or prosecution, the Bush administration instead labels opposition media as the criminal, declaring the Fourth Estate to be the Fourth Front. “Full spectrum information dominance” equates ‘unfriendly’ media with enemy propaganda, declaring both “a weapon of war” and a legitimate military target.

In 2004, the US government also declared it a Terrorist Organization. Under US Executive Order 12334, Lebanon’s Al Manar TV was the first television station ever to be legally designated a ‘terrorist entity’ equivalent to Al Qaeda. The Bush administration, at Israel’s urging, silenced Al Manar satellite transmissions into the US. In 2006 the order was expanded to include Al Noor Radio, Al Ahed & Al Intiqad Newspapers and their parent company the Lebanese Media Group. On March 23, the US Treasury Department froze Al Manar’s financial assets. On July 13, the Israeli Defense Forces tried to blow Al Manar up. Three employees were injured, but broadcasting goes on. IDF also bombed Al Noor Radio.

The Lebanese Media Group is affiliated with the Arab League, the Arab Federation of Journalists and the Union of Arab Audiovisual Media. It complies with Lebanese law and some of its staff are also democratically elected Ministers in Parliament. The organization has won dozens of awards from media associations around the world, and Al Manar footage has been shown by such western outlets as Reuters, AP, C-SPAN, BBC, EuroNews, FOX and CNN.

In Lebanon, each major religious sect has its own broadcasting outlet. But only LMG has been targeted. LMG and Al Manar TV is the broadcasting outlet for Hezbollah. On April 21, 2006 I asked Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora about the distinction. “Well of course we would prefer that all media be treated equally democratic, but we do not make American laws so I can not comment.”

After the initial State Department decision, in January, 2005 local and international press demonstrated in Beirut to support Al Manar. The National Audiovisual Media Council denounced the US decision. Competing MBC TV producer/director Suzen Moussa challenged the decision’s fairness, and Ghassan Hajjar, an Editorial Director for New TV told me: “International law protects the right of free speech equally to all world press- American, Israeli and Arab. No one has the right to accuse Al Manar of terrorism for speaking their minds.”

In America's losing battle for Arab hearts and minds, Al Manar propaganda is as effective as American propaganda is impotent. Lebanon's Daily Star quoted an estimate that Al Manar has up to 200 million viewers via satellite, correspondents worldwide, and a nightly news program that often outranks Al Jazeera. It broadcasts in Arabic, English, French and Hebrew. An American AUB professor in Beirut, Dr. Judith Harik, told me that Al Manar often features video not seen elsewhere. "Many people here tune into Al Manar whether they are Christian, Druse, Sunnis or what, because Al Manar has very good reporting. Their analysis is very precise and very well thought out. They're very shrewd, forthright and are taken very seriously."

Especially in Israel. It was Al Manar's Hebrew broadcasts and images of IDF casualties during the occupation that galvanized Israeli public opinion against the war. The Israeli military had portrayed its losses as minimal, until Al Manar exposed the toll. Speaking to Adnkronos International, Hezbollah media director Hassan Ezz Eddine summarized the Israeli response: "We have to watch Al Manar to learn the truth about our boys in Lebanon."

As a "fair & balanced" Arab TV network, Al Manar TV dubs itself 'the media of resistance' to Israeli and American occupations. Al Manar's blunt, relentless criticism of US-Israeli policy has been called hate speech and incitement to violence. The US State Department deems Hezbollah and its TV station, "the A team of terror" and more dangerous than the "B team Al Qaeda." Ironically, the US-sponsored Tolo TV in Afghanistan regularly features Taliban/Al Qaeda interviews along with Taliban chanting. Attempts to halt such broadcasts were condemned by the international community as censorship.

In the Haret Hreik district of south Beirut, Al Manar headquarters are in a packed, threadbare neighborhood of family-owned shops and apartment buildings. The streets are marked by blue and yellow Zakat donation boxes decorated with upturned hands over an AK-47 raised in the fist of the Shia martyr Hussein, cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. It is the Party of God's trademark, and it adorns everything from Hezbollah's yellow flags and pennants (Hezbollah owns exclusive rights to Lebanon's soccer league), to its coffee mugs for sale at area souvenir shops.

After clearing a checkpoint with armed guards, I visited Al Manar's high tech offices. The state-of-the-art facilities included an extensive video archives/library, modern recording studios, sound booths and edit bays. In the Green Room I spoke to Sheikh Khoury Noor Ad Dine of the Hezbollah Political Council. He denied that the TV station committed atrocities or waged war on civilians. In fact, a large percentage of Al Manar employees are female. "Hezbollah differs from many Islamic groups in our treatment of women. We believe women have the ability like men to participate in all parts of life."

From its founding in the 1980s, Hezbollah women have headed education, medical and social service organizations. Most recently Hezbollah nominated several women to run in the Lebanese elections. It named Wafa Hoteit as a Chief of Al Noor Radio (also recently bombed), and promoted 37-year old Rima Fakhry to its highest ruling body, the Hezbollah Political Council. Part of Fakhry's duties include interpreting Islamic feminism in Sharia law for the Committee for Political Analysis.

I asked Sheikh Khoury if Sharia law liberated women to be recruited in the military or as 'suicide bombers'? "Not now. We don't need it at the present. If we need it in future we

would.” But the staff at Al Manar has no combat function. These sisters, daughters and mothers in the mujahedin shoot film, not bullets.

It was an issue I also raised with Al Manar film editor, Farah Noor Eddine, 30. Ms. Eddine has a B.A. in Journalism. She emphasized that she has relatives in the US and likes Americans. “Being Hezbollah doesn’t mean that you are a military woman or a military creature. Hezbollah, the ‘Party of God’ is mentioned in the Qoran. It’s a way of thinking or acting. We are ordinary persons.” She is a vegetarian, plays ping pong, but has never fired a gun or seen a ‘suicide vest.’

With Israel attacking Beirut, “Radical Islamic Terrorists” are again the demons of US media sensationalism. It was a charge that exasperated Health News anchor Mariam Karnib, so I asked her to define terrorism. “It is using excessive force or violence in a way that is not justified. They are calling us terrorist, but I know I am not like this. I was brought up here. We know our rights. We are not fools.”

Ms. Karnib, 29 has a B.A. in Political Science and a B.A. in Social Science and is now earning a Masters in the Sociology of Communication.

I asked her if Hezbollah women are familiar with the notorious Saudi website, Al Khansaa that trains female jihadis. She was not aware of it, she said, and when off-duty preferred happier fare. “I love Danielle Steele, Barbara Cartland and Barbara Taylor.”

Al Manar TV has been boycotted for inciting violence and suicide attacks against Israel in its MTV-inspired videos, and “Death to America” is a signature slogan. Ms. Karnib dismissed the idea that Al Manar clips were powerful enough to produce this result, and felt sloganeering could not be taken seriously. The most effective training for ‘militants’ was American cartoons, she explained, which “are filled with alot more violence, terrorism and hatred- and they are aimed specifically at children.” She also criticized video games which promote brutal killings of ‘Arab Terrorists’ and ‘Muslim fanatics’.

In the game of dueling propaganda, Hezbollah has met its match. Israel’s media features extermination, liquidation and elimination as frequent themes, especially regarding the Palestinians: “those people will become even bigger animals than they are today, with the aid of an insane fundamentalist Islam. So if we want to remain alive we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day. Every day.” Jerusalem Post, 5/21/04 More recently, Chairman Yisrael Beiteinu called for Arab Knesset members to be executed. Israel Koenig (from Israel’s Al Hamishmar newspaper): “We must use terror, assassination, intimidation, land confiscation and the cutting of all social services to rid the Galilee of its Arab population.”

The Neocon state within a state has orchestrated its series of “Clean Break” Arab wars via the US-Israel military/media complex, where the Fourth Estate doubles as a Fifth Column. The crusade against Al Manar TV originated with Israel’s Natan Sharansky and former Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom. The Israeli Defense Forces’ Arab Media desk decided its propaganda leafletting of targeted areas prior to bombing them was inadequate. “Israel must concentrate on Arab media.”

On the US side, Israeli Avi Jorisch wrote a book on Al Manar TV called “Beacon of Hatred” for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. It was endorsed by Dennis Ross and used to pressure Congress and the Pentagon (which had not previously known of the station) to censor Al Manar. The coalition also pressured commerical advertisers to boycott Al Manar.

Anti-Defamation League, CAMERA.org, American Jewish Congress and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies allied with AIPAC against Al Manar worldwide. The neocon Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) took credit for persuading world leaders in Germany, Sweden, Australia and France to outlaw Al Manar. The Netherlands and the EU followed suit, and Spain was coerced into removing Al Manar from Latin American programming. MEMRI has recently announced a new front- France has just agreed to silence Iran's Al Sahar TV.

This success has emboldened an expanding wish-list of opposition media "soon to be banned." Like a press version of Daniel Pipe's "Campus Watch", Israel's Foreign Ministry, the IDF and its US surrogates are blacklisting a number of Arab media- Palestinian TV, Egyptian television, Saudi Arabia's Al Majd and ART TV, and Iran's Al Alam. Bomb attacks on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are well known. As of July 16, Al Manar has been targeted five times.

The State Department's Counter-Misinformation Office monitors international Arab media. It also tracks image offenses against Israel under the Global Anti-Semitism Awareness Act passed by Congress to monitor anti-Jewish hate speech worldwide. Todd Leventhal, whose propaganda pedigree includes the Pentagon, NSA and the Information Operations Task Force (renamed after the Office of Strategic Influence closed) allegedly did similar Israeli protection work for the Voice of America.

In 2005, the Israeli Knesset passed the Global Holocaust-Deniers Bill that criminalizes questions on the Holocaust. It allows Israel to extradite deniers worldwide for prosecution. It has no statute of limitations. Al Manar TV's dispute of the Holocaust was one reason for it being declared a terrorist organization.

With "Israel's sixth Ambassador" John Bolton at the helm, on September 14, 2005, the United Nations passed Resolution 1624 which, according to Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, designates Al Manar as a terrorist entity. In May, 2006 the UN Secretary General distributed a 32-page proposal for a "code of ethics" for journalists as part of the war on terror. It would ban interviews with 'terrorists', or press reports "that generate sympathy for terrorist causes." Websites that recruit, raise funds or sympathize with their views would be put under surveillance.

On July 16, 2006 I spoke with Al Manar TV editor Ibrahim Moussawi in Beirut. With explosions in the background, he denied American media reports of a hundred Iranian Revolutionary Guards helping Hezbollah in the south. "Lies- all lies. Israeli propaganda! Why do you believe this? We have enough of our own Lebanese to fight. We don't need Iran to win!" Al Manar writer/producer Fatima Berri's words on the propaganda constantly leveled at Hezbollah, and Arabs in general, returned. "It is untrue information. To use lies, make up information to use against you to adjust to their policy."

Now the policy has come home. English-language outlet Indymedia routinely bucks established opinion, defends Palestinians and challenges the Fifth Column media. On one occasion it factually documented the varying estimates of Holocaust victims in a controversial piece "The Diminishing Numbers of Alleged Dead in Auchwitz." On March 14, 2006 Indymedia found out it is on the "Terrorist Watch List." While the reasons are hotly debated, they remain. Charges against the accused have been censored on grounds of national security.Trish

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