

India Bans Arab TV Channels Under Pressure From Israel

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Shahid Raza Burney, Arab News

BOMBAY, 6 August 2006 — In a country widely referred to as the world's largest democracy, the Indian government has succumbed to mounting Israeli pressure and ordered a nationwide ban on the broadcast of Arab television channels.

The Indian government's ban on Arab television stations is in complete contrast to the friendship that Arab countries imagine exists with their neighbor across the Arabian Sea. It seems the ban is a move to ensure that Indians do not get to see the atrocities that are presently being committed by Israel in Lebanon and the occupied territories.

Nabila Al-Bassam, a Saudi businesswoman on a trip to Bombay, told Arab News how she became exasperated at not being able to watch Arab channels at Bombay's leading five-star Oberoi Hotel. When she took up the issue with the hotel manager, she was told that Arab television channels had been banned across India.

A perplexed Al-Bassam then sent an SMS to Arab News Editor in Chief Khaled Almaeena to verify whether this was indeed the case. "Oberoi Hotel tells me that the government of India has banned all Arab TV channels. Why? I hate watching CNN and BBC," she wrote to Almaeena.

Talking to Arab News, Oberoi Hotel Manager Mohit Nirula did allude to the fact that a ban was in place. "The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has laid down certain rules. It is our duty to abide by and follow the rules of the country," he told this correspondent.

Minister of Information and Broadcasting Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi was busy in Parliament and was unavailable for comment on the issue. However, a ministry official explained why the Indian government decided to enforce the ban. The official highlighted that India enjoys close and cordial relations with Israel and the US more than any of the Arab governments.

According to another source within the government, the ban is a clear sign to all governments in the Middle East that the Israeli, American and British governments carry far more influence in India than any of the Arab governments.

Several senior Indian journalists explained that the ban was an indication that India had succumbed to Israeli pressure rather than American.

"The whole exercise is to browbeat Arabs and show them as terrorists. The government is

subscribing to the absurd argument that channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya promote hatred and encourage terrorism,” they said.

Political analysts in India described the move as a game of double standard that India is playing. On the one hand India establishes friendship with the Arab world while simultaneously it joins with Israel and the US in defaming them. It seems that the pro-Israeli lobby wishes to drive a wedge between India and its time-tested Arab allies. The Indian government’s present stance is in stark contrast to the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s staunch support of the Palestinian cause.

The banning of Arabic channels is a federal government decision, done under what senior Indian journalists claim to be intense pressure from the Israeli, American and British governments.

The Indian government has been vocal in its condemnation of Israeli barbarity and has offered millions of rupees in aid to refugees in Lebanon. Arabs sympathetic to India have therefore met the news with surprise.

Many Arabs draw inspiration from India’s heroic struggle against British imperialism and the Indian independence struggle is seen by Palestinians as a brilliant example of throwing out the yoke of imperialism. It is sad that 50 years after independence the world’s largest democracy unfairly suppresses alternative opinion and allows itself to be dictated to by foreign powers.

The analysts believe the Indian government may have used a clause within the Cable TV Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995, that certain channels or programs that can potentially cause damage to India’s friendly relations with foreign countries can be banned, a clear violation of democratic ideals such as freedom of expression and freedom of speech.

The response to the ban by hotel administrations across Bombay has been dismal. Chad Alberico, JW Marriott’s customer care official in Washington, said: “We have reviewed your recent inquiries regarding the television offerings at our JW Marriott Bombay. We have phoned our colleagues at the hotel to discuss the matter at hand, but as it is the weekend, we will need additional time to form a complete response.”

“I’m on my way home, it’s the weekend and I will respond on Monday,” said Shehnaz Ankelsaria from the Taj President Hotel. Annan Udeshi from The Hilton was unavailable and asked for a message to be left on her recorder. Khushnooma Kapadia of Marriott Hotel said she would get back later. Rafat Kazi from the Grand Central Sheraton said that she would answer after consulting her general manager. Puja Guleria of Sheraton Maratta said she needed time to deal with the questions. Firuza Mistry of Grand Hyatt said that she was not aware of the facts and would check and respond, and Priya Mathias of Hyatt Regency said that she would also need to check with her senior officials to comment

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