

# Israel's Battle Against Free Speech: The Shuttering of Al Jazeera

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*"Politics," as the harsh, albeit successful German **Chancellor Otto von Bismarck** claimed, "is the art of the possible, the attainable - the art of the next best."*

*To that should be added the stark awareness of being prudent, gingerly wise, appropriately cautious. Mind how you go in avoiding any foolishness on the way.*

Going after the motley press and news outlets while claiming to be a card-carrying member of the democracy club is far from prudent and more than a touch foolish, bound to make the critics croak and other fellow members decry. And this is exactly what has happened in the context of Israel's decision to shut down the Qatar-backed station Al Jazeera.

On May 5, police raided the offices of the network at the Ambassador hotel in Jerusalem. According to Israeli **Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi**, equipment had been seized in the raid.

Al Jazeera duly released a [statement](#) strongly condemning and denouncing "this criminal act that violates human rights and the basic right to access of information." The network went on to affirm "its right to continue to provide news and information to its global audiences." Oddly enough, the ban is far from being a watertight one, as the channel remains accessible in Israel via Facebook.

Al Jazeera has had a troubled relationship with Israel. Sounding like paranoid family members who have imbibed a bit too much, accusations frothed from various politicians accusing the network of being a Hamas front. In a dubious honour, the network's name became associated with a law passed by the Israeli Knesset on April 1.

The instrument authorises the Minister of Communication, with the consent of the Prime Minister and the Ministerial Committee on National Committee, to shut down foreign news outlets operating in Israel deemed a national security threat. This entails halting broadcasts by Israeli content providers, restricting access to the relevant provider's website, shutting down transmitters in Israel and the seizure of devices used in supplying the channel's content, including mobile phones. Betraying the Netanyahu government's continued suspicion of the country's judicial process, the law shackles the judiciary from overturning such a decision, notwithstanding any belief that it should be.

The dust had barely settled on the vote before Minister Karhi revealed plans had been hatched to shutter Al Jazeera's operations in Israel on the grounds that it "promotes terrorism". According to a [statement](#) from the Israeli Communications Ministry,

"There will be no freedom of expression to Hamas mouthpieces in Israel."

Akiva Eldar, a political scribe who pushes pieces for *Haaretz*, [suggested](#) that the closing of the network was "a very populist move to feed the beast of the public opinion that is very disappointed from the conduct of the government in Gaza and in the international arena". The tail-end of the remark did little to stir convention, as the move was designed "to please the partners from the radical right".

The passage of the law prompted a High Court of Justice filing by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) on April 4. The [petition](#) argues for the cancellation of "the temporary order allowing sanctions to be imposed on foreign broadcasting channels from Israel." On May 2, with rumours of imminent action being taken against the Qatari broadcaster, the same organisation sought an interim injunction, refused by the court, to instruct the government to refrain from issuing orders to a foreign broadcaster till the petition was decided. The ACRI had every reason to be disappointed with the ruling, given that Al Jazeera had been refused a prior right of plea and denied effective judicial review.

On May 6, a further filing was made to join a separate proceeding in the Tel Aviv District Court regarding the sanctions imposed on Al Jazeera, with the ACRI [challenging](#) the propriety of the administrative process involved and whether there was, in fact, a "real security risk" posed by the network.

The Al Jazeera law is not a singular instance of state repression regarding matters of free speech. The signs point to a chronic ailing in the Israeli polity. Adalah, a Palestinian-run non-profit NGO advocating for the rights of Palestinians in Israel has [noted](#), by way of example, the "severe crackdown on the freedom of expression rights of Palestinian students seeking to suspend or even expel them for their posts on social media platforms." The posts in question "vary widely, ranging from expressions of solidarity with the people of Gaza, to Quranic verses, to scathingly critical views of the Israeli military's actions, to seemingly arbitrary content unrelated to Hamas or to the war."

On April 18, the Israeli police, in all its intimidating glory, [entered the home](#) of Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian in the Old City of Jerusalem. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, who holds the Global Chair in Law at Queen Mary University of London and a post at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was subsequently detained for comments made the previous month on the [Makdisi Street podcast](#).

Of particular interest to the authorities were comments purportedly calling for the abolition

of Zionism and the uncontroversial call to halt the genocidal actions in Gaza. She was strip-searched, handcuffed and interrogated, and denied access to such necessities as food, water and medication for a number of hours. Her frigid cell also lacked blankets, while she was inadequately clothed. Her release on bail precipitated further interrogation sessions, with the police keen to tease out incriminating matters from previously published academic papers.

From targeting academics, activists and students, to drawing the covers over a network of renown, the Israeli state has made a vulgar statement against the role of free speech. Such creeping authoritarianism, however, shows itself to be one-eyed and, eventually, self-defeating. Ultimately, in the gallop, it is bound to fall over itself.

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**Dr. Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)

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