

Censoring Al-Manar TV: Banned from US television, does station broadcast simply an alternative Arab viewpoint or dangerous propaganda?

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Accompanied by an eerie electronic score, the video opens with images of American bombs exploding over Baghdad.

Enter Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, speaking at a press conference during the early stages of the Iraq war: "The weapons that are being used today have a degree of precision that no one ever dreamt of," he says, explaining how hard America tries to avoid hurting civilians.

His remarks are looped again under footage showing injured Iraqis, bandaged and bloodied. The final shot is of a young boy, his head sheathed in a cast, wailing inside a hospital.

Super-imposed crosshairs glide across the image and settle on his injured face.

At the bottom of the screen appear, in Arabic, the words: "Indeed ... very precise!!!" Such sarcasm directed at U.S. leaders is a common feature of videos on Al-Manar, an Arabic-language TV station based in Lebanon that reaches millions of viewers around the world.

Is this journalism -- or propaganda that should be censored?

That question has been hotly debated since the U.S. State Department effectively banned Al-Manar from U.S. television in December, labeling it as an arm of Hizballah -- which is a heroic resistance group to many in the Arab world but has been branded a terrorist organization by the American government. Once State added Al-Manar to the Terrorist Exclusion List, the station's signal disappeared from GlobeCast, a subsidiary of a French company that delivered it exclusively to satellite dishes in the United States. Effective Monday, Al-Manar will no longer be available in Europe either, the European Union decided Thursday.

Images from Al-Manar once flickered regularly in homes, cafes and Arab cultural centers across the Detroit area, offering the Midwest its unique view of the Mideast.

No more.

The ban has miffed a number of Arab-Americans in Michigan who watched Al-Manar for its alternative viewpoint. And it has raised questions about free speech, terrorism and America's struggle to make friends in the Arab world.

"It goes against our principles, the idea of freedom that we're trying to spread around the world," says Osama Siblani, publisher of the Dearborn-based Arab-American News. "Are we really that afraid of words?"

But critics of Al-Manar say the ban is not just about words; it's about inciting violence against American interests.

"This station crosses all red lines," said Avi Jorisch, author of the book "Beacon of Hatred: Inside Hizballah's Al-Manar Television."

"It makes Al-Jazeera look like a Girl Scout infomercial," he said, referring to the largest Arab news channel, based in Qatar.

The ban comes at a time when the U.S. government is expanding its budget for American-made radio and TV programming in the Arab world that is intended to counter Al-Manar and Al-Jazeera -- a station Rumsfeld once called "vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable."

The United States is an old hand at overseas propaganda. During the Cold War, America spent millions on Radio Free Europe to reach listeners behind the Iron Curtain of communism. But after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States slashed the budget for foreign broadcasts by 40 percent. Now, the propaganda apparatus is being restored to Cold War levels, but aimed at a different audience. Last year, the United States launched Al Hurra -- "The Free One" -- a 24/7 station that reaches the Arab world via satellite.

"We will challenge the voices of hate and repression with truth and the voices of tolerance and moderation," Kenneth Tomlinson, chair of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the federal agency that oversees the effort, told Congress. The agency spent about \$69 million last year, and last month it asked Congress to continue the spending for 2005.

It's too early to gauge Al Hurra's effect. But one survey, done by Radwa Mobarak of the American University in Cairo, said that in its first month on the air, viewers "perceived Al Hurra as biased" against Arabs.

Siblani says it doesn't make sense to push an American station in the Arab world while at the same time preventing an Arab station from broadcasting in America.

"How can we permit ourselves to spend so much of our taxpayer money to broadcast Al Hurra to the rest of the Arab world, telling them . . . our way of thinking, our way of interpreting things and then prevent them from exchanging opinions, from stating the other point of view," Siblani wonders. "Whether you agree or not with someone, it's good to exchange opinions."

But critics of Al-Manar say that the station broadcasts more than just opinions.

"It's not a question of freedom of speech," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. "It's a question of incitement to violence, and we don't see why, here or anywhere else, a terrorist organization should be allowed to spread its hatred and incitement through the television airwaves."

On Tuesday, President George W. Bush reiterated that "we view Hizballah as a terrorist organization." But in an apparent slight shift in policy, the president held out the possibility that Hizballah could become an acceptable player in the future of the Middle East. Hizballah currently holds several seats in Lebanon's parliament and is eager to be a respected part of that country's government.

"I would hope," said Bush, "Hizballah would prove that they're not (terrorists) by laying down arms and not threatening peace."

Al-Manar started in 1991 and grew in popularity during Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon. The satellite outfit runs talk shows, kid's programming and documentaries, but it is most known for its news, broadcast in both Arabic and English. It's the second most popular station in the West Bank and Gaza Strip after Al-Jazeera.

The station maintains its independence, but Jorisch says it was always closely linked to Hizballah and the organization's benefactor, Iran, which both fought to drive Israel out of Lebanon. After Israel left in May 2000, Hizballah handed out bumper stickers that read "Without Al-Manar, victory would have been elusive," Jorisch noted in his book.

Over the years, the station has closely covered Lebanon's battles and tensions with Israel, and also the Palestinian intifada. After Israel destroyed the facilities of Palestinian Television in December 2001, Al-Manar carried the Palestinian TV logo for two days in place of its own.

"Fight them with the picture, as with the bullet and stone," says a voice on one Al-Manar video that Jorisch documents in his book. While the screen rolls images of Israeli soldiers roughing up some Palestinians, the voice urges viewers "to record the facts and events on the ground in occupied Palestine and keep them or deliver them to the correspondents of Al-Manar in order to expose to the world the brutality and aggression of the Zionist occupation Army."

The constant anti-Israeli tone of the station sometimes carries over into its coverage of America. One video clip features a rising Statue of Liberty dripping blood with scrolling text underneath: "On the dead bodies of millions of Native Americans and through the enslavement of tens of millions of Africans, the United States rose."

In another, a coin with President Bush on one side and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on the other spins across the screen over the words: "Two faces; One terrorism."

Provocative, sure, but Al-Manar has never called for attacking the United States in the way, that say, Al Qaeda has.

Still, Jorisch says the station incites enough hatred to be banned.

"The bottom line: Al-Manar encourages and allows for an environment where attacks, on the scale of 9/11, are acceptable."

But critics of the ban say it has more to do with Israel's pressure on Lebanese Shi'ites and the Palestinians than with any actual threat.

Bilal Dabaja used to watch some of Al-Manar's news shows, broadcast at 7:30 a.m. in America.

"A lot of people depended on the station to get a different viewpoint," says Dabaja, a college student from Dearborn. Dabaja gets his news from a variety of sources, including CNN, Fox, Google and the radio.

"This is healthy, this is what democracy needs," Dabaja said. "If you ban a viewpoint just because you disagree with it, that's not healthy."

The campaign to ban Al-Manar has come largely from Israel and pro-Israeli outfits such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which published Jorisch's book.

Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet Union dissident who is now an Israeli minister, had been lobbying for months in France and other European countries to ban Al-Manar.

Sharansky pointed to a 29-part series based on the anti-Semitic forgery, "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which ran on Al-Manar in October and November 2003. Part of the Syria-produced series claims that Zionists plotted for world domination. An attorney for Al-Manar later apologized for the program, saying in an Associated Press story that "it was inadmissible."

In December, France moved to ban Al-Manar, saying it broadcast hate. The next week, the United States banned it, but used security reasons and the Patriot Act as its legal basis.

David Gad-Harf, head of the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit, agrees with the bans.

"It crosses the line of responsible journalism," he said of Al-Manar. "We are probably the freest society on Earth in terms of allowing unbridled speech, but ... even free speech has its limits."

What concerns some Arab Americans and Muslims, though, is what they see as a double standard on hateful programming. They point to a litany of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim language on mainstream TV and radio in America over the past few years.

Last November, the popular Don Imus and his sports anchor, Sid Rosenberg, were watching footage of Palestinians at Yasser Arafat's funeral on MSNBC's "Imus in the Morning Show." Rosenberg called Palestinians "stinking animals" and said:

"They ought to drop the bomb right there, kill 'em all right now." No one was reprimanded for his remarks.

Hussein Ibish, former Washington correspondent for the Lebanese newspaper Daily Star, doesn't think Imus -- or Al-Manar -- should be banned.

"Al-Manar is not my cup of tea. ... There is objectionable stuff on it," said Ibish, now vice president of the Progressive Muslim Union. "There's a very good argument for treating everything you see on Al-Manar with the biggest grain of salt."

And there's also objectionable material on Web sites such as WorldNetDaily, "which spews nothing but hatred and vitriol," Ibish said. But "I would be horrified if someone tried to ban it," said Ibish, who's against censoring Al-Manar.

"You can think whatever you want about Al-Manar, but is this really what we want the government to do, because ultimately where will it end?"