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Hezbollah and the “Al Manar affair”

Olfa Lamloum¹

On December 14th, 2004, Al Manar was banned from broadcasting through Eutelsat (European Telecommunications Satellite Organisation), a limited company under French law. The ban resulted from an order issued by the French Council of State, which for the first time ever had ordered a telecommunications satellite operator to cease broadcasting a television channel on French territory.

Thus ended the “Al Manar affair”, which had provoked much debate in France and stirred a controversy concerning the presumed “antisemitism” of Hezbollah's television channel and its “pernicious influence” on the Arab community in France². According to the official chronology issued by the channel's management, the affair was set in motion on November 12th, 2003,³ when the Council Representing Jewish Institutions in France (CRIF) alerted then French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to “the antisemitic statements carried” in one of the programmes on Al Manar, the series “Al Shatât” (The Diaspora).

In this essay, I propose an analysis of the sequence of events, starting with a presentation of the Al Manar channel and its broadcasting modalities in France, followed by a brief expose on the legal and political implications of banning the channel. In the final section, I will explore the way Hezbollah managed this crisis by situating its response within the framework of the general “political communication” strategy of the Party of God.

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² Libanvision. (2006) ‘La procédure envers Al-Manar : un dossier révélateur qui soulève bien des questions’ available at <http://www.libanvision.com/almanar.htm>

³ Al Manar at the time published a chronology of the events in French, which opened with the following statement: “The decision to ban the broadcasting of Al Manar channel in France is an unprecedented act which constitutes an attack on the freedom of expression, information and opinion.”

Al Manar in France

The satellite channel Al Manar, launched in the year 2000, shortly after the victory of Hezbollah in the south of Lebanon, was designed as a tool to achieve legitimacy in the Arab-muslim sphere. The project must be viewed within the framework of the transformations which were overhauling the pan-Arab media landscape in the mid-1990s, and as a manifestation of the intention of the Party of God to break, as far as possible, the western monopoly on the information flow covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Seizing the opportunity offered by the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada and using newly acquired digital technology (a contract with Thomson was signed in 1998⁴), the management of Al Manar lost no time in setting up the new medium. A satellite transmitter (uplink) owned by LBC⁵ was rented for 4 hours daily to broadcast⁶ programmes.

Despite the meagre means initially at its disposition, Al Manar gained ground and quickly achieved great visibility in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Blanford, 2001) At that time, not having any correspondents in the field, the channel broadcast eye-witness testimonies, giving a voice to the Palestinians, and aired reports supplied by amateur journalists. It additionally broadcast a fictional feature on the leader of the first Palestinian uprising of 1936, Azzidine Al-Qassâm (who would later inspire the name Hamas chose to give to its armed division). The growth of its audience was without a doubt greatly aided by the mediocrity of the official channel of the Palestinian Authority, as well as the rise of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. These factors combined to offer Al Manar a large playing field (Lamloum, 2008).

The new channel swiftly expanded to 24-hour broadcasting and, until its banning in France and its subsequent inclusion in the United States' list of terrorist organizations,

⁴ The contract provided for the construction of the first digital studio in the region. Al Manar has also signed a contract with Sony for the purchase of cameras, projectors and digital mixing consoles.

⁵ Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, a Christian channel known for its entertainment programmes, originally close to the Lebanese Forces

⁶ As Safir, 28/12/2004.

was carried on seven satellites.⁷ Al Manar's satellite channel and its terrestrial counterpart are run by the same team and broadcast the same programmes, with the exception of the daily news report - which on the satellite channel focuses more on pan-Arab news and less on the domestic Lebanese situation – and religious programmes – which are purged of their purely shiite dimension.⁸

Al Manar's interest in the French sphere became evident in 2001, when the channel recruited a correspondent in Paris, a student of Lebanese nationality who had been based in France for ten years and was known for his commitment to the Palestinian cause. In October 2002, on the occasion of the Francophone summit held in Beirut, Al Manar launched a French edition of its news report – which was to continue until after the 2006 war.

Despite these two measures, the French – and more generally, western – sphere remains virtually absent on Al Manar's screen. It occupies only a marginal space in its programming schedule and is mostly limited to the reporting of demonstrations in support of the “Palestinian cause”. The editorial matrix of Al Manar is “resistance to the occupation”. Its objective is to generate support for the adherence to action of “the Islamic resistance” by inscribing it into a pan-Arab and interconfessional vision. Its preferred mode of communication (developed as early as 1991 for the terrestrial channel) is to display, in images and sounds, the “vulnerability” of Israel and its army.

Despite the absence of reliable figures on the reception of Arabic channels and specifically of Al Manar in Europe, various indicators pointed, in 2003, to a limited audience for the Hezbollah channel in France,⁹ suggesting that its presumed influence on the “youths of the banlieues” - an argument abundantly evoked to justify its banning - should not be overestimated.

⁷ Al Manar is currently carried on ArabSat, Badr 3 and NileSat.

⁸ The satellite channel, for example, limits itself to indicating prayer times without broadcasting the prayer itself, in which Shiites include a line that proclaims Ali to be the representative of God (ashhadu anna ‘aliyan waliyu allah).

⁹ These indicators throw doubt on estimates presented in a study conducted by Avi Jorisch (2004), an expert with the neo-conservative think tank 'The Washington Institute for The Middle East', which puts forward the figure of 10 to 15 million viewers for the channel.

We will quote just two of these indicators. The first one is of a statistic nature. Al Manar is not even mentioned in a survey carried out by Zogby International in 2003 – i.e. at the time of the events – which inquires into the six major television channels preferred by a sample of 3,400 Arab viewers in the Middle East as their sources of information. Heading the classification is the Qatari channel Al Jazeera, which receives a 51.7% approval rate, leaving Al Arabiya far behind with 8.4%.¹⁰ The survey thus indicates the meagre audience of Al Manar in the Arab sphere and suggests that fantastic figures for its French audience should be disavowed. During the same period, and despite the spectacular invasion of the global media space by Al Jazeera, the head of Al Manar's office in Paris had estimated the channel's audience as 700,000 on peak moments.¹¹

The second indicator is based on the technical and sociological requirements for the reception of Al Manar. Technically, in France in 2003, to be able to watch Hezbollah's channel, it was necessary to possess a satellite decoder and to point its parabole 13° East, towards the satellite HotBird4. But at the moment of the controversy, a mere 2.6 million households were equipped with a decoder which gave them the technical capability to receive Al Manar (Carrigos, Roberts, 2004). Sociologically, moreover, limited knowledge of the Arabic language in the French-born generation of youths of Maghrebine origin constitutes an objective obstacle, or so it may be assumed, to the accurate reception of Al Manar by the Arab community in France. Additionally, the fact that the channel is alien to the French environment in terms of choice and presentation of information, codes of visual narration, and modes of understanding daily life, makes Al Manar slightly alien to the world of the second-generation immigrants, including the fringe minorities choosing to affirm their identities of origin.

Legal problems and political implications

During the month of Ramadan in 2003, Al Manar broadcast 'Al Shatât' (The Diaspora), a Syrian series presented as a history of Zionism from 1812 to 1948 which refers to a

¹⁰ Cf. *Washington Post*, October 15th, 2004, "Top Six International News Channels Watched by Arab Viewers" available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

¹¹ Interview with Michel Kik, December 2004.

“Jewish conspiracy” to take over the world. Presumably inspired by the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion', the series even shows a ritual murder as featured in old Christian anti-Semitic myths (a Jewish rabbi sacrificing a Christian child and using its blood in the preparation of unleavened bread). The CRIF lost no time in reacting and approached the president of the 'High Council for Audiovisual Matters' (CSA¹²), as Al Manar was broadcast by a company under French law. In December 2003, this French regulatory body wrote to the chairman of the board of Eutelsat, asking him to regularize the situation of the estimated 170 channels that were unlicensed at that moment, and particularly of Al Manar.

Meanwhile, Al Manar had ceased broadcasting the incriminated series, claiming not to have watched the series before its broadcasting due to the habitual short-notice delivery of the voluminous ramadan productions.¹³

In January 2004, in a speech delivered at the annual CRIF dinner, the French Prime Minister gave an indication of things to come, declaring that: “The screenwriting of hate into films has returned. (...) The Government proposes to amend the law of September 30th, 1986 (...) The new legislative framework (...) will allow the CSA to initiate legal action in court before an administrative judge in order to enforce a stop to the broadcasting of an unlicensed channel (...)”¹⁴

In September 2004, the Lebanese Communication Group (LCG), Al Manar's publishing company, deposited a complete licensing dossier with the CSA. On November 19th, 2004, the licensing agreement between the CSA and Al Manar is signed. It is valid for one year only (as opposed to the 5 years legally applicable) and is of an “extreme severity”, as admitted by the president of the CSA, Dominique Baudis, himself. The channel is required “not to incite to acts or behaviour punishable by law in France, to

¹² The CSA is an “independent administrative authority created by the law of January 17th, 1989 to guarantee the freedom of audiovisual communication in France under the conditions defined in the [law of September 30th, 1986](#).” Cf. the CSA's website.

¹³ The statement is likely true: the Ramadan series ('musalsalat') broadcast by all Arab channels in the month of fasting are usually Egyptian or Syrian productions, either commissioned by the respective channels or offered by production companies. They are in general not delivered to the channels until the eve of Ramadan and are sometimes produced just-in-time per episode as the episodes are broadcast.

¹⁴ ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Premier ministre, sur le conflit israélo-palestinien, les relations entre la France et Israël, la lutte contre l’antisémitisme et le racisme et sur la laïcité, Paris le 31 janvier 2004, available at <http://www.vie-publique.fr/cdp/043000405.html>

respect the political, cultural and religious sensitivities of the Europeans (...), not to broadcast programmes likely to cause problems with public order (...), to respect an honest representation of matters of conflict”.¹⁵ Nevertheless, only days later, on November 30th, the CSA decides to suspend the channel, citing a “grave failure to meet the demand of honest information” of which Al Manar would have been guilty. The channel is accused of broadcasting the statements of an interviewee accusing the Hebrew state of spreading AIDS in the Arab world, as well as a clip “inciting violence” against Israel. The case is brought before the administrative court on December 13th, where the Council of State orders Eutelsat to cease broadcasting the channel on the grounds of it carrying programmes that “ascribe to a militant perspective carrying antisemitic connotations”¹⁶. The day after, Al Manar disappears from the Arabsat channels carried on the French satellite.

Despite the very real ambiguities of Hezbollah's channel, as established during the legal procedure, the sanction applied seems of an exceptional nature. Firstly, the sanction was only made possible by a modification, *in extremis*, of article 42.10 of the law of September 30th, 1986 on electronic communications and communication services.¹⁷ Secondly, the sanction was final and was not preceded by any gradual sanctioning leading up to the pure and simple suppression of Al Manar. And thirdly, it was only applied to the channel of the Party of God, despite similar “failures” by numerous other channels in the same period .

The severity of the sanction, judged excessive by several organizations for the defence of press freedom,¹⁸ is evidence of the political dimension of “the Al Manar affair”. The socio-political constellation in which the case played out, and the actors involved, leave no doubt as to the fact that the juridical battle was a continuation of the political

¹⁵ The license can be consulted on the CSA's website. <http://www.csa.fr>

¹⁶ Ordonnance du juge des référés du 13 décembre 2004, N°274757, available at http://www.conseil-etat.fr/ce/jurispd/index_ac_ld0460.shtml

¹⁷ The new law of July 9th, 2004, provides the CSA with the authority to ban channels broadcast in France.

¹⁸ Reporters sans frontières (Reporters Without Borders, RSF), for example, judges the procedure “hasty” and “worrying”. Cf. the communique RSF issued on December 14th, 2004, available at http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=12077

conflict by other means. It is useful to remember that the affair came in the wake of a specific national and international constellation of events:

- the eruption of another affair in France, namely that of the Islamic headscarf. On March 15th, 2004, after prolonged public debate, French parliament virtually unanimously approved a law banning ostentatious religious signs in public schools. This episode of what Emmanuel Terray (2003) called “political hysteria” contributed greatly to a prevailing climate of “clash of civilizations”, against a backdrop of “threat to the community” and “Islamist activism”;

- the deterioration, according to Israel, of that country's image in European – and particularly French - public opinion, culminating in an opinion survey released in October 2003 based on a sample of 7,515 citizens of the European Union. The survey indicated that 59% of those questioned responded positively to the question of whether Israel constituted a “threat to world peace”. Iran, North Korea and the United States came joint second with 53% each.¹⁹ The results generated vicious criticism of French Middle East policies on the part of Israel;

- the adoption of Resolution 1559, on September 2nd, 2004, by the UN Security Council at the joint initiative of France and the United States, calling on Syria to pull its troops out of Lebanon and on Hezbollah to disarm its militia.

It is clear from the former that the sanctions imposed on Hezbollah's channel were initiated in a very sensitive context. The ban on Al Manar was a focal point where several issues met. Domestic issues first, as the ban appeared to be a part of a unifying national battle fought against “terrorism” and “fundamentalist Islam” as an extension of the battle against the “Islamic headscarf” and in defense of the “secular school”. International issues also, concerning the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian

¹⁹ The interviewees of the survey, conducted by Eurobaromètre, were presented with a list of 15 countries of which they were asked to indicate whether or not they represented a danger to peace. After the publication of the results, the Italian presidency of the EU declared it was “surprised and upset” and stated that the answers did not reflect the official position of the EU (cf. AFP, November 3rd, 2003).

conflict in the media and the public construction of an image of those participating in it. The mobilization of the Israeli government as well as a number of campaigns supporting Israel, particularly the websites Proche info.org and the Middle East Media Research Institute (Memri²⁰) – the latter even providing the CSA with recordings and translations of Al Manar's programmes – in support of banning the channel, testify to this.

Independently of its direct reach,²¹ the measure has in actual reality meant the cut-off of all legal access to the media for one of the main actors in the conflict, namely Hezbollah. It has moreover been a prelude to the construction of the illegality of Hezbollah's medium in the international sphere, setting in motion a series of prohibitive measures in other states. Barely a week after the French decision, for example, the United States included Al Manar in their list of terrorist organisations for “inciting violence”.²² Al Manar was subsequently subjected to the same restrictions in the Netherlands (March 2005) and Spain (July 2005). The latter two decisions meant the disappearance of the channel from virtually all of Europe and South America (via the Spanish satellite Hispasat). Operator Intelsat (based in Pembroke) followed suit, removing Al Manar from its broadcasts to Canada and the United States. Tarbs (based in Australia) did the same for Australia and South East Asia. In August 2005, Asiasat (based in Hongkong and owned by Globesat, a daughter company of France Télécom) stopped broadcasting the channel to Asia (Koch, 2008).

On the ability to compose with “legals borders”

On first view, Hezbollah's management of the “Al Manar affair” seems surprising. The party has accepted to respond to all demands posed by the CSA (demand of regularisation, preparation of a complete licensing dossier, readiness to modify certain formulations in its journalistic narrative). Despite its doubts concerning a favorable

²⁰ Founded in February 1998 by colonel Yigal Carmon, a former member of the Israeli intelligence services, the Washington-based Middle East Media Research Institute (Memri) surveys the major Arabic and Farsi media publications. (Memri launched a campaign in 2001 denouncing Palestinian school books, accusing them of propagating antisemitism).

²¹ For example, a correspondent of Al Manar visited the Elysée on July 13th, 2008, to cover the meeting between the Lebanese, French and Syrian presidents.

²² BBC News, December 17th, 2004.

outcome of the French legal procedure carried out against Al Manar,²³ its management had engaged itself to take up its defense and accepted to submit to all the limitations of the licensing agreement, to the extent of adopting an internal protocol listing “the words” to be used²⁴ to describe the conflict with Israel in terms that are non-incriminating under French law. This seems a costly measure in regard of the primary function of the medium: defending the resistance.

Yet, rather than a one-off manoeuvre, the attitude of Al Manar's management must be viewed as consistent with the evolution of Hezbollah's political strategy. The action actually illustrates the willingness of the party since the end of the 1980s to present itself as an organisation which is fully integrated in the legal political and institutional field and willing to respect the law. By the force of their irruption, these media have formed the indispensable tools to give publicity to this policy (Lamloum, 2008). Presenting Hezbollah in text and image, they are the centerpiece of the party's “presentation of self” (Goffman, 1973).

In the course of the “Al Manar affair”, this has played out at several levels:

- national: within Lebanon, from the onset of the events, Hezbollah has sought to construct a wide-ranging alliance to defend its channel, based mainly on the support of the National Audiovisual Council of Lebanon, the Lebanese government and the personal contacts of Rafiq Hariri with his friend President Jacques Chirac. Lebanese press reports of the period attest to the reigning sympathy for Hezbollah's cause;
- pan-Arab: Hezbollah has also sought to enlist the support of the very official Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU). Its choice to cease broadcasting via Eutelsat was aimed at safeguarding its broadcast on nine other official Arab satellites that offered Al Manar in the same selection of channels offered by Arabsat via the French operator. In

²³ According to the daily *As Safir*, reactions to the affair within Al Manar's management tended to result in two points of view. The optimistic view estimated that France would not go as far as a ban, given that Europe and especially Germany were at the time engaged in mediating between Israel and Hezbollah in view of a prisoner exchange. The second opinion was in favour of satisfying the demands of the CSA and signing a convention that would allow the channel to regularise its situation in France and to conform to the relevant laws.

²⁴ I have never had the occasion to consult this list, mentioned to me in the course of interviews with the managers of the channel, as well as by Lebanese newspapers at the time.

this way, Hezbollah sought to preserve its warm relations with the Arab regimes, specifically Saudi-Arabia and Egypt;²⁵

- European: Hezbollah has also endeavoured, on several occasions, to defend its cause before the then European delegate for media affairs, Viviane Reding, although without success.²⁶

Interpreting the decision as a sign of the French political authorities caving in to the pressures of the “Israel lobby”, Al Manar drew the conclusions from its legal defeat.²⁷ The subsequent series of bans and its classification as a “terrorist organisation” convinced the channel that it was considered a potential “security and military target”.²⁸ From that moment onwards, Al Manar started taking the precautions necessary to face this danger. When its headquarters in Harit Hreik in the southern suburbs of Beirut was obliterated by the Israeli air force in 2006, therefore, its broadcasts were interrupted for only two minutes, after which the station transformed itself for several weeks into a “phantom channel”, broadcasting from studios in locations unknown. Al Manar had constructed an alternative headquarters, its location kept secret even until today, and the majority of its critical employees were prepared for the possibility of war.

But above and beyond pure security measures, the affair has led Al Manar's management to a double conclusion, prompting them to incorporate, to a certain extent, the criticisms of the channel's detractors as well as to try and thwart the bans in order to consolidate and expand its audience.

Thus, some adjustments would be made to its image: in first instance, a deontological charter was adopted. Published on the eve of the 33-day war, it describes Al Manar's mission as “aiming at participating in building a better future for the Arab and Muslim societies and for human society in general through focusing on the tolerant values of Islam and promoting the culture of dialogue and cooperation among human civilization

²⁵ Controlling respectively ArabSat and Nile Sat.

²⁶ Interview with Al-Hâj Ibrahim Farhât, administrative director of the channel. Ouzai, May 16th, 2008, in the headquarters of Al Manar.

²⁷ This interpretation is notably proposed in the official paper documenting the chronology of the affair, provided to me by the channel's management.

²⁸ Al-Sharq al-awsat, July 30th, 2006.

and the followers of the heavenly religions”. The charter establishes “credibility”, “accuracy”, “objectivity” and “equity” as fundamental values.²⁹ Moreover, Al Manar commits to clearly distinguishing Israelis, Zionists and Jews.

Starting in 2006, a new English-language programme is launched. Presented by a journalist speaking perfect English, and inviting exclusively westerners as guests, “In their Eyes” is designed to be “a show that bridges the gap between the East and the West. In a way that it freely expresses the mutual respect the other side's values, beliefs and ideas emanating from the just cause of the Lebanese Resistance since its onset.”³⁰

But the channel's major concern remains the threat posed by the banning measures. Two new alternatives are developed.

The first is the Al Manar website, its only display window in those countries where its broadcasts are banned. During the last four years, www.almanar.com.lb has gone through a remarkable evolution thanks to the addition of more personnel and the diversification of its services.³¹ At its launch in 1999, it offered just a few recordings of speeches by Nasrallah to a background of religious and nationalist music. In 2004, its 4-member team was extended to 13. Today, the site is bilingual and offers an average of 100 new items of information per day, as well as articles and a presentation of the major programmes broadcast – some of which would soon be unencrypted. The 2006 war has justified this investment as the website was to be the major pillar of Hezbollah's visibility in the West, registering viewing peaks despite being hacked. According to its manager, the site has an average per day of 55,000 visitors³² (Google estimates vary from 26,000 to 30,000). Another major benefit for the channel has been its ability to broadcast online since 2006.

The second alternative has been the conclusion of broadcasting contracts with new satellite operators who, while less competitive, offer greater independence of the major imperial powers. The most recent example of this strategy is a broadcasting contract signed in April 2008 with the operator of the Palapa C2 satellite (owned by Indonesia Telkom, a company in which the Indonesian government is a majority shareholder). Al

²⁹ Cf. the promotional DVD of the channel, “Ever lasting flame”, published just after the 2006 war.

³⁰ Cf. the presentation of the programme on the channel's website. The programme has recently invited, among others, the sister of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to express her anti-war stance.

³¹ Interview with Youssef Wahbi, manager of the website of Al Manar, November 2007.

³² On September 2008, the website displayed: 'Visitors Number: 37905525 since 07/08/2006'.

Manar can now be received on the territory of the largest Sunni Muslim country in the world.

Conclusion

According to a study carried out by Steve Metcalf of the BBC Monitoring Service, Al Manar reached the peak of its popularity in the Arab world during the 2006 war and hasn't declined since. During the war the channel rose from the 83rd to the 10th position among Arabic channels. The “affair” with the CSA has without a doubt not harmed its reputation in the Arab sphere – on the contrary, it has offered Al Manar a lot of publicity. The banning measures hitting Al Manar may have succeeded in consolidating the fearful image of the Party of God, which was created mainly in Europe and the United States in the wake of the war on terrorism,³³ but they have not succeeded, in the middle term, to prohibit access to its media. While it is certainly more difficult today to watch Al Manar in France or Spain, new information and communication technology guarantees its users access to forbidden screens. This technology has not only changed the requirements for the production and circulation of information, it has also thwarted political censorship, in the North as in the South. The “Trojan horse” (Mattelart, 1995) of the media is harder to eliminate than ever before.

Additionally, the Al Manar affair constitutes an important instance in which to observe up close the legitimizing strategies constituted by Hezbollah's media. Apart from serving as a mobilizing tool for the “resistance”, Al Manar also offers a different, legal-rational form of legitimization. The channel is at the center of the new negotiating and mediating ploys faced by Hezbollah since its first participation in the legislative elections of 1992, which imposed on it the need for fluctuating and permanent readjustments. Its dual nature as an organisation which is both political and military, makes it necessary to keep developing accommodation strategies in response to recurring oscillations in power relations (Palmer Harik, 2004).

³³ On November 3rd, 2001, while fully engaged in the war against the Taliban, the US administration changed the official designation of Hezbollah, labeling it as a ‘Foreign Terrorist Organization’ possessing a ‘global reach’.

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