

Beacon of Hatred:

Inside Hizballah's al-Manar Television

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Executive Summary

Given the increasing popularity of satellite dishes in the Arab world, many analysts have suggested that television has become a force for Westernization in the region. Yet this technology can be used to propagate hate and conflict as readily as tolerance and understanding.

Watch an al-Manar video clip (http://img.slate.com/media/12/IsraelisAreTerrorists_100k.asf) from the CD. File: 100k | Windows Media Player required

Al-Manar, Arabic for "the beacon," is the official television mouthpiece of the Lebanese Party of God, or Hizballah. The terrorist organization uses al-Manar -- which it calls the "station of resistance" -- as an integral part of its plan to reach not only the citizens of Lebanon, but also the broader Arab and Muslim worlds. Indeed, Hizballah is the first organization of its kind to establish its own television station and use it as an operational weapon.

STATION BACKGROUND

In 1991, shortly after Hizballah actively entered the Lebanese political scene, al-Manar was launched as a small terrestrial station. Although legally registered as the Lebanese Media Group Company in 1997, al-Manar has belonged to Hizballah culturally and politically from its inception. Today, the terrestrial station can reach Lebanon in its entirety and broadcasts programming eighteen hours daily. Moreover, al-Manar's satellite station, launched on May 25, 2000, now transmits twenty-four hours a day, reaching the entire Arab world and the rest of the globe through seven major satellite providers.

Al-Manar's popularity in the region is clearly high. Lebanese television officials assert that the station is the third most popular in the country, rising to number one when events heat up in southern Lebanon or the Palestinian territories. Similarly, Israeli sources report that al-Manar ranks second only to al-Jazeera in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Regarding financial support, Lebanese law prohibits local television stations from receiving funding from any source outside Lebanon (whether individuals or governments). Although al-Manar vociferously denies receiving any

such funding, it is an open secret that Iran bankrolls the station. Al-Manar's annual budget currently stands at \$15 million -- nearly half the size of al-Jazeera's budget. The station also receives advertising revenue from both Arab and Western companies.

TARGETING THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL

Following Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from its self-declared security zone in southern Lebanon, both Hizballah and al-Manar shifted their focus from the Lebanese arena to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. This transformation became especially noticeable after the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000.

Today, Hizballah continues to use al-Manar as a means of publicly offering its services to Palestinians fighting for the destruction of Israel and the total liberation of historic Palestine (i.e., all territory west of the Jordan River). With one of its avowed activities being "psychological warfare against the Zionist enemy," Hizballah has effectively linked its own fate with that of the Palestinians, relying on the fight against Israel for much of its regional legitimacy and influence. Accordingly, one of al-Manar's major objectives is to inspire resistance. Since the start of the intifada, the station has also served as the first medium through which many Palestinian terrorist groups claim responsibility for suicide attacks against Israelis.

With regard to the United States, al-Manar has broadcast anti-American propaganda since its inception, often using the same propaganda methods it employs against Israel. Various programs have focused on distorting U.S. history, lambasting U.S. Middle East policy, propagating conspiracy theories about the September 11 attacks, and demonizing the relationship between Washington and the "Zionist entity," Israel. With the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, both Hizballah and al-Manar renewed their vitriol toward their old, reliable foe, the "Great Satan." Throughout the war and its aftermath, the station's news programs, talk shows, and propaganda videos focused on U.S. aggression in the region and openly called for suicide attacks and other acts of resistance against U.S. targets.

PROGRAMMING CONTENT

Al-Manar programming skillfully combines news, talk shows, documentary series, propaganda music videos, and other elements. Much of this programming boasts a professional appearance, impressive-looking sets, handsomely dressed anchors, and well-written and well-delivered scripts.

News. Al-Manar broadcasts eight Arabic news bulletins daily, in addition to one English and one French bulletin. Besides its headquarters in Beirut, the station has news bureaus in Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates (Dubai). It also has correspondents in Belgium, France, Iraq, Kosovo, Kuwait, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Russia, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, and the United States. In the eyes of the Arab world, this global presence lends the station substantial credibility. Al-Manar's unique ability to deliver news from the Palestinian territories -- particularly following terrorist attacks -- also serves to bolster its standing among viewers.

Primetime programming. Al-Manar's primetime lineup includes a number of self-produced talk shows, dramas, and documentaries, including the following:

- The Spider's House is a talk show dedicated in part to uncovering the weaknesses of the "Zionist entity." The program claims that Israel can be destroyed through a combination of low-intensity warfare and a demographic shift in favor of Arabs, the latter facilitated by implementing the Palestinian right of return to all of pre-1948 Palestine. In addition, since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, episodes have explored how to use violent resistance -- including suicide bombing -- to end the U.S. occupation.
- What's Next is one of several al-Manar political talk shows that feature guests espousing vitriolic anti-American views. Some of these guests are spokespersons for groups that the U.S. government has labeled Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entities and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).

- My Blood and the Rifle is a documentary series dedicated to glorifying Hizballah's guerrilla fighters and inspiring viewers to join the resistance against Israel.
- Returnees is a program dedicated to the Palestinian refugee problem. In keeping with Hizballah ideology, these individuals are referred to not as "refugees," but rather as "returnees" who are slated to reassume ownership of the lands that currently make up the state of Israel.
- Terrorists is a weekly documentary series highlighting perceived "terrorist acts" that Israel has perpetrated against the Arab world throughout history.
- In Spite of the Wounds is a documentary series dedicated to individuals who have been injured while fighting against Israel. Their sacrifices are glorified, as is their newfound status as pillars of society.

Music videos. Music videos (anashid) make up approximately 25 percent of al-Manar's programming. One of their primary purposes is to keep Arab anger focused on the Palestinian problem and the U.S. presence in Iraq. They also serve as reminders of Hizballah's willingness to lead the fight against Israel.

Al-Manar officials assert that they strive to create music videos with the level of professionalism that they see on U.S. television networks, specifically MTV. The videos themselves tend to feature violent images and incendiary language. By the station's own admission, these elements are meant to foster suicide operations by inciting individual viewers toward violence. For example, Ayat al-Akhras, a young Palestinian woman, reportedly watched al-Manar incessantly before blowing herself up in front of a Jerusalem supermarket in March 2002, killing two Israelis and wounding twenty-eight others.

Filler material. Al-Manar often broadcasts short sections of filler material in between full-length programs or during commercial breaks. This material serves several key functions, including the following:

- displaying addresses and bank account numbers to which viewers can send money in support of Hizballah;
- listing locations worldwide where demonstrations will soon take place;
- disseminating various inflammatory slogans in Arabic, English, or Hebrew (e.g., "In your death, you are victorious"; "Jerusalem is ours"; "The road to victory is resistance").

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

U.S. officials have made clear that Hizballah ranks high on the list of possible targets in the war on terror. In September 2002, for example, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage called Hizballah the "A-team" of terrorism, suggesting that it constituted a greater threat to the United States than perhaps even al-Qaeda.

Washington must now devote equal consideration to the mass media tools that Hizballah uses to further its agenda. The U.S. government should not underestimate the damaging effects of a television station that encourages violent activity such as suicide bombing in the guise of slick programming that appeals to all ages.

No measure -- short of direct military confrontation -- can silence al-Manar completely, particularly as long as Syria maintains its occupation of Lebanon and Iran continues its support of Hizballah's radical activities. Nevertheless, the U.S. government can take several steps to limit the scope and effectiveness of the station's propaganda efforts and make its operations far more difficult and costly:

- The Treasury Department should add al-Manar to its terrorism sanctions list.
- The United States should ask the four Lebanese banks that currently hold Hizballah bank accounts -- and any other banks with which Hizballah does business -- to freeze the accounts in question. If these banks refuse to comply, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control should designate them as institutions harboring accounts of a terrorist organization. This designation would allow Washington to freeze their U.S.-based assets and block their

access to U.S. markets.

- The United States should take action against any American financial institutions that continue to serve as agents for noncompliant Lebanese banks.
- The Foreign Terrorist Asset Tracking Center -- the intergovernmental task force responsible for uncovering terrorist financing -- should begin monitoring al-Manar broadcasts for advertised bank accounts.
- The United States should enforce existing laws or pass new legislation prohibiting U.S. companies from advertising on any of Hizballah's mass media outlets.
- Washington should begin a dialogue with European Union officials regarding European companies that advertise on al-Manar.
- The United States should enforce existing laws or pass new legislation prohibiting U.S. media from purchasing footage from, or providing footage to, al-Manar. Washington should encourage Europe to do the same.
- The United States should enforce existing laws that ban U.S. citizens and companies from working with SDGT entities and FTOs. In doing so, the U.S. government should close down al-Manar's Washington bureau (housed within the Associated Press's Washington bureau) and consider pressing criminal charges against the bureau's chief, Muhammad Dalbah.
- The United States should investigate foreign firms that have provided assistance, including media training, to Hizballah or al-Manar.
- The United States should encourage foreign satellite package providers to remove al-Manar from their networks. It should also force IntelSat, a U.S.-based provider, to cease offering al-Manar.
- The United States should consider providing the Lebanese government with the intelligence and support it needs to enforce its own ban on foreign financing of Lebanese media.
- Washington should ask Iraqi authorities to remove al-Manar's correspondents from Iraq.
- In light of Syria's ongoing occupation of Lebanon, the United States should demand that Damascus end al-Manar's calls for suicide attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and elsewhere. Syria's response should be treated as a central test for whether Damascus is cooperating in the war on terrorism.
- The United States should pressure Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates to close down al-Manar bureaus. It should also pressure Belgium, France, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Russia, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates to forbid al-Manar correspondents from reporting on their soil.

Al-Manar's programming puts American lives at risk, both in Iraq and elsewhere, and hinders the prospects for peace and stability throughout the region. Washington must therefore expand its efforts to alter or silence the station's message. Only then will the United States be able to make serious headway in the battle of ideas in the Middle East.

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