

Bahrain bans al-Jazeera news station

Robert Stevens
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On May 10, Bahrain Information Minister Nabeel Yacoub al-Hamer announced the banning of the Qatar-based Arabic TV station al-Jazeera from reporting inside its borders. Al-Hamer said that the ban had been imposed because al-Jazeera “deliberately seeks to harm Bahrain”. The minister is reported to have stated that, “It is a channel penetrated by Zionists.”

The ban, a flagrant attack on press freedom, was imposed during the first general election held in the country for nearly 30 years and the station was specifically denied its request to cover the event. There is no doubt that the decision has also been prompted by al-Jazeera showing footage considered embarrassing by the Bahrain elite, of demonstrations against the US led war in Afghanistan and protests against the recent Israeli onslaught against the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Among these was the demonstration on October 20 last year when anti-war protesters gathered at the main mosque in the capital city Manama and tore up US flags. The protest occurred following the first military strikes on Afghanistan by US and British fighter planes and warships on October 7. Bahrain is the headquarters of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet.

On April 5, demonstrators in Manama threw makeshift firebombs and stones at the US embassy to protest the Israeli military action against the Palestinians. The demonstration ended when security police fired rounds into the air and threw tear gas, dispersing the protesters.

In February last year the King of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, inaugurated a new period of reforms that would include the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, national elections in 2002, and the creation of an independent judiciary by 2004.

On November 12, US armed forces dropped a 500-pound bomb on the al-Jazeera studio in Kabul, Afghanistan, immediately before the Northern Alliance

occupied the city, so as to prevent any footage being broadcast that was not vetted by Washington. The station’s London bureau chief, Muftah Al Suwaidan, told the media, “The building is the only one to have been hit so it looks like it was deliberate.”

The Saudi Arabian ruling family and Tunisia also ban the station. Jordan, Egypt, as well as the Palestinian Authority have all sought to limit its transmissions.

Another factor in Bahrain’s banning of al-Jazeera is that it is used by Qatar to further its own foreign policy. Qatar has often been at loggerheads with its much larger neighbour, Bahrain, particularly over control of the Hawar Islands. Bahrain has sought to develop the islands as a tourist resort and invited international oil companies to drill there after the International Court of Justice decision in March last year that the islands belonged to Bahrain, not Qatar. Bahrain was the first Gulf Arab state to produce oil, in 1932, but its reserves are now near exhaustion.

The crackdown on al-Jazeera by Bahrain’s ruling Al Khalifah family was not carried out in isolation. The regime fears any criticism of its policies or internal dissent amongst the 650,000 population being made known to the outside world. The Al Khalifah family, members of the Sunni Bani Utbah tribe, have ruled the territory since 1783 and hold all-important political and military posts. There is a long history of civil unrest involving the Shi’ite majority, who are effectively barred from holding public office.

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The dissemination of news and information in Bahrain is strictly monitored, censored and regularly curtailed. The government owns the Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation (BRTC), which operates five terrestrial television channels and although there are a number of private newspapers, these are closely linked to ruling circles. Satellite TV is officially banned, but it

is estimated that around six percent of Bahrain's 230,000 homes had access to satellite television in 1999.

The proscription of al-Jazeera follows the banning of websites operated by opposition groups. On March 26, al-Hamer announced that the government had blocked four websites, claiming they were "inciting sectarian strife."

On May 4, a demonstration was held outside the Bahrain Telecommunications Company headquarters to protest government censorship of the Internet. The company has a state monopoly on Internet access. Some of those in attendance had their mouths taped up.

Individual journalists have also been subjected to intense harassment and prosecution. In November 2001, freelance journalist Hafedh El Sheikh Saleh was prosecuted by the government for articles that were deemed unlawful and "not compatible with the spirit of the national charter and of the constitution." Saleh's articles were condemned on the basis that they served to "undermine national unity." The Ministry of Information then attempted to ban him from writing for the *Akhbar al-Khaleej* newspaper and appealed to other Gulf states to request that regional journals also ban his writings. Saleh successfully sued the ministry and in January of this year the banning order was lifted. Saleh was originally prosecuted over an article he wrote for the Lebanon *Daily Star* about the position of the majority Shi'ite Muslim community in Bahrain. Saleh, however, said that he believed his prosecution stemmed from an article he wrote for a Lebanese paper criticising Bahrain's foreign policy toward the US.



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