



Lebanon's media battle

By Paul Cochrane

September, 2008. On May 7, what was supposed to be a day of strikes to demand higher wages metamorphosed into eight days of fighting between the Hizbullah-led opposition, "March 8," and the pro-government, "March 14" forces.ⁱ

At the forefront of Lebanon's bloodiest infighting since the civil war were the media, relaying the heated words of politicians that stoked the conflict while beaming out propaganda thick and fast.

During the conflict Lebanon's media became further entrenched in their sectarian and political camps, pan-Arab media did the same, and domestic media outlets came under direct attack.ⁱⁱ The Lebanese public, meanwhile, holed themselves up inside and watched events play out on television.

After Ghassan Ghosn, the head of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers, announced that the strike was cancelled, Hizbullah and its supporters shut down Beirut by blocking roads with piles of rubble, burning tires and overturned rubbish bins. The following day, Hizbullah military units moved into the west of the city and started taking over, engaging in street battles with members of Sunni politician Saad Hariri's Future movement and affiliated parties.

What changed a day of socio-economic concerns into political violence were demands Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government made in the days prior to the clashes. Walid Jumblatt, the pro-government Druze leader and head of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), had called for Hizbullah's private phone network to be shut down, the removal of surveillance cameras Hizbullah had installed by runways at the airport, and for the head of airport security, a Shia by the name of Wafik Shoukair, to be replaced as he was alleged to be working for Hizbullah.

On May 8, Hizbullah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah responded in a press conference, saying the decisions of the government were "tantamount to a declaration of war, and the start of a war...on behalf of the United States and Israel." He also went on to say that the phone network was used in "defending the country against Israel," and that Jumblatt's dream "is Sunni-Shia strife. We will not fulfil his dream."ⁱⁱⁱ

That evening, as reported by only a few media outlets and relayed in a firsthand account from an employee of the Hariri-owned, pro-government Future TV (FTV) channel, the Future movement brought in thousands of men from Akkar and Tripoli to the Kantari area of West Beirut. "There were two six-wheeler trucks full of mattresses for the guys to sleep on in preparation for a fight. When we saw them we felt more comfortable, then the next day they all disappeared. Maybe they ran away or the Future movement changed its

mind and didn't want a clash. The men were paid to be there, and not armed, just with batons," he said.

The next group to disappear from around the FTV offices in Kantari was the Lebanese Army, including three armored personnel carriers that had been stationed in the channel's parking lot. Then the SecurePlus security guards hired to protect FTV fled, bar one blubbering 18-year old guard that had to be slapped around by the news editor to "act like a man."^{iv}

On the morning of May 9, the FTV employee said an army officer entered their Kantari offices. "He said armed men were outside and if you don't leave the building, they will come in or burn the building down. The news editor asked for re-assurances: for employees to be allowed to leave and the station to not be harmed, as well as for one technician to stay behind. After everyone left – according to the technician – the Colonel came back with Hizbullah technicians to be taken to the master control room. Cables and satellite links were cut – they were professional and knew what they were doing. They needed to find the server, so made the technician call the head technician to find out, and on the phone [Hizbullah] said they knew where he lived."

Future TV's terrestrial broadcasts, main satellite network and 24 hour news channel, Future 24, were all off the air. New TV, a pro-opposition TV channel, was later given exclusive access to film the seized offices. Meanwhile, Future's radio station Al Sharq, the Future-owned Armenian radio station Sevan, and the *Mustaqbal* (Future) newspaper had their offices raided and ceased operations.

Later that Friday afternoon, Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) members, in an act of revenge for the burning of their offices by Mustaqbal supporters during clashes in February 2007, set FTV offices in Raouche on fire. The FTV employee said an estimated 20-30% of the channel's archives were lost during the fire, including footage of the July 2006 war between Hizbullah and Israel. "Fortunately, the week before a big part of the archives had been copied, and all the footage relating to Hariri was in a different location," he said.

Propaganda a go-go

Prior to the shutdown of FTV, violence had escalated on the streets of West Beirut and in other parts of the country. Lebanese TV channels were constantly streaming live news of the events, with reports, statements, claims and counter claims forcing viewers to keep an eye on all channels to get an idea of what was going on.^v

Even pan-Arab channels were showing their true colors, with Saudi-owned al-Arabiya TV clearly on the side of the Siniora government and against Hizbullah, while the Qatar-owned al-Jazeera gave sympathetic coverage to Hizbullah.

Members of the government decried Hizbullah's actions as a "coup d'etat," which was quickly picked up on by March 14 affiliated media outlets, on al-Arabiya TV, as well as by the Western media. March 14 also denied that Future had a militia, reiterating that the only militia in Lebanon was Hizbullah, and that, in the words of Hani Hammoud, senior adviser to Hariri, "the end result is that Iran has taken over the country."^{vi}

Al-Manar and NBN, on the other hand, spoke of the “government’s militia,” and alleged that March 14 was receiving orders from Washington and Israel, making Lebanon a pawn in the U.S.-Zionist agenda for the Middle East, thus a legitimate target.

Hizbullah played the take over of Beirut as a move in a “correction-ist direction, bringing a new identity to Beirut, of being against Israel,” said Dr Ibrahim Mousawi, a Lebanese political analyst allied with the March 8 movement.

The next day, May 10, propaganda went into overdrive, with al-Manar showing video montages of March 14’s connections with the United States via slowed-down, key-hole style images of Jumblatt meeting with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State David Welch, and Siniora meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (but notably avoided showing footage of Rice and Welch meeting with Parliamentary Speaker and Amal leader (March 8), Nabih Berri).^{vii} Al-Manar also showed footage of a hand grenade with Hebrew writing on it that was allegedly found in pro-government offices, implying March 14 was receiving military aid from the Israelis.

But with Future TV off the air, March 14 was left with only one sympathetic Lebanese TV station, LBC, which aired footage of a demonstration outside the FTV offices to protest the channel being taken off air.

“The shutting down of FTV showed the increasing importance of the media as a target on the battlefield,” said Habib Battah, a media analyst and Arab television critic. “Keeping FTV off the airwaves was a psychological attack on Future’s political supporters. It also gave the other side a monopoly over propaganda messages, with no channel to rebut the damaging allegations that were made against it.”

Among the opposition there was a great deal of *schadenfreude* over FTV being silenced. The fact that al-Manar and Hizbullah had made so much noise over the destruction of al-Manar’s studios in Beirut’s southern suburbs by Israeli fighter jets during the July, 2006 war aggravated many people when it came to the shutting down of FTV, with condemnations coming in from around the world. And unlike Future TV, which restarted broadcasting on May 14, al-Manar had contingency plans for an attack on its facilities and was only off air for two minutes.^{viii}

“It is ironic that al-Manar protested Israel’s attack on its headquarters as a violation of the free press while al-Manar supporters helped shut down a Lebanese-owned media outlet less than two years later,” said Battah.

The decision to not merely gag but totally silence FTV even angered some March 8 supporters, with Mousawi saying he didn’t agree with FTV being shut down and that it “backfired” on Hizbullah.

According to Ramez Maalouf, Professor of Journalism at the Lebanese American University, Hizbullah’s rationale behind taking FTV out of the media equation was to calm the situation in the country.

“People in Hizbullah said [if FTV stayed on air] it would make the war more violent and dangerous, and was a way of keeping things quiet,” he said. “To me it was dangerous, as it further underlines the idea that people have that Hizbullah can do anything as it is on a mission from God.”^{ix}

Later on May 9, however, Hizbullah issued an apology for the closure of FTV and the treatment of journalists while covering events, but laid the blame squarely on the government's shoulders.^x

"We are sorry about everything that has happened to the press corps, but the government is to blame for letting things get this far. We hold the government fully responsible for everything that has happened to the media. We hope these media will be operating again soon under the control of the Lebanese Army," Hizbullah MP Hassan Fadlallah said in a statement to the Lebanese National News Agency.^{xi}

Somewhat ironically, on the final day of the conflict, on May 14, when fighting had shifted from Beirut to the Chouf and Tripoli, al-Manar released a statement citing "violations of press freedom" when viewers in northern Lebanon complained that Future movement supporters had pressured local cable providers to stop broadcasting al-Manar, NBN and OTV.

Media war

"Truth was the victim of this war, and there was a lot of misleading propaganda," said Mousawi. "Of course there were variations between one outlet and another, and I believe the media that followed the March 14 camp made the largest distortion – FTV became just like any media outlet of a gang, and didn't hold to basic principles of journalism, inciting hatred and creating news about things that didn't exist. At the same time, the March 8 media was not impeccable either – all made mistakes."

Mousawi added that March 8 media were keen not to fall into the trap of provoking fitna – discord – between the Sunni and Shia, which Nasrallah claimed Jumblatt and the government were trying to do, and what Hizbullah claims is an American project in the region.

To Maalouf, blame lay less with the media than with Lebanon's sectarian political system. "It's a case of politicians bringing things to a boil, but the media needed to use words more carefully," he said. "I think the fault lies with the politicians as it's about the choices the political system gives people, not the media."

Maalouf said LBC was seen as the least biased of all the channels. "But all in all, LBC is like *An Nahar* (newspaper), center-right," he added. Notably, he said OTV, allied to opposition leader Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, increased its viewership during the clashes.

"The more divided the audience became, the more people navigated to the channels that reflected their views. For instance, the tenser it became, the more Christians watched OTV, which they didn't watch much usually," Maalouf said.

To Battah, the conflict showed that most Lebanese television stations have become an intrinsic part of the political establishment.

"Lebanese TV is no longer just biased, it is one of the most important weapons in the hands of political groups," he said.

“This has led some Lebanese politicians to justify attacks on the media, and unfortunately this is now accepted by many of their constituents. It’s a very dangerous development because even now average citizens are engaging in attacks on journalists just because they don’t agree with the broadcaster’s politics. This is definitely a low point for Lebanese journalism. The polarization of society has increased sectarianism in the press and stoked hatred toward the press as a whole.”

The aftermath

While viewing habits had changed during the clashes, the media environment started to get even more virulent once the fighting died down and FTV was back on air.

With the fighting ongoing, FTV had re-located to Beirut Hall to prepare for getting back the on air. “We waited for the political green light as Future faced a lot of threats that the Kantari offices would be burned down [if FTV went on air],” said the Future TV employee.

When FTV relaunched, channels like al-Arabiya showed solidarity by rebroadcasting footage, while LBC aired a statement by the Mufti of Beirut on Marcel Ghanem’s show saying FTV was back.

“It’s a different story how coverage changed after rebroadcasting,” said the FTV employee. “FTV went from being biased to being extremely biased. It started calling it an *alam harb* (media war), people were asked not to say certain things and to cut a statement to change the meaning. For instance, they transcribe a speech and then the editor underlines the words you can use, five words here and 20 words there, and this changes it all, it becomes a different speech. The management and the news directors also started saying [March 8 media] are lying in news bulletins and creating this story, so it’s ok for us to do whatever. I think this is the worst effect of what happened,” he added.

Al-Manar meanwhile started portraying the end of the conflict as a victory for Hizbullah, which had not capitulated to any of Jumblatt’s demands and, by force, driven March 14 into an agreement in Qatar that ended a political crisis that had lasted 18 months. In December 2006, Hizbullah and its allies pulled out of the government and established a tent city that closed off downtown Beirut. Once President Emile Lahoud stood down from office in November last year, the political standoff stalled the election of a new head of state some twenty times. By June 21, with a compromise reached on a new president, General Michel Sleiman, the tents were taken down and Beirut appeared to be back to normal.

On TV, programming returned to its usual content, including politically partisan points of view and journalism that skirts the line between news and propaganda.

Paul Cochrane *is a contributing editor for Arab Media & Society and a freelance journalist based in Beirut, writing on business, culture and the media. His blog is www.backinbeirut.blogspot.com.*

ⁱ The March dates refer to demonstrations in downtown Beirut in the wake of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s assassination on February 14, 2005. March 8 consisted of Hizbullah and Amal, while March 14 (the date of the so-called ‘Cedar Revolution’) consisted of Hariri’s Future movement, the Progressive

Socialist Party, the Lebanese Forces, the Phalange Party and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). The predominantly Christian FPM later joined March 8, dividing the Christian community.

ⁱⁱ Lebanese TV channels are split into two camps: The pro-opposition channels are Hizbullah-backed al-Manar TV, the National Broadcasting Network (NBN), which is partially backed by Shiite parliamentary speaker and head of the Amal movement Nabih Berri, New TV, and the Free Patriotic Movement-run Orange TV or OTV. Pro-government channels are Mustaqbal (Future) TV, owned by the Hariri family, and the Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBC). See Paul Cochrane, 'Are Lebanon's Media fanning the flames of sectarianism?' in *Arab Media & Society*: www.arabmediasociety.org/?article=206

ⁱⁱⁱ A transcript of Nasrallah's speech is available at http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/05/nasrallah_justi.php

^{iv} Members of the opposition, and opposition media, claim the Hariri-owned security company SecurePlus is the Future movement's militia.

^v Both al-Manar and Future TV did not reply to official requests for interviews with the management.

^{vi} Nick Blandford, 'Uncertainty deepens in Lebanon as Hezbollah seizes control of west Beirut', *Christian Science Monitor*, May 9, 2008 - www.csmonitor.com/2008/0509/p25s23-wome.htm

^{vii} For screen shots and descriptions of media coverage during May see Lebanese-American journalist Habib Battah's blog, Beirut Report – www.beirutreport.blogspot.com/2008_05_01_archive.html

^{viii} See Paul Cochrane, "Bombs and broadcasts: Al-Manar's battle to stay on air" in *Arab Media & Society*: www.arabmediasociety.org/?article=19

^{ix} Maalouf was making a reference to the slogan Hizbullah adopted after Harb Tamouz – "Nasr min Allah," Victory from God.

^x Many journalists, foreign and Lebanese alike, were threatened by Hizbullah and Amal gunmen when trying to cover events. Two al-Jazeera TV staff were also wounded during clashes in a Beirut neighbourhood. An al-Arabiya TV crew were briefly taken prisoner in a Beirut suburb on May 8, released after half an hour by Hizbullah.

^{xi} www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/3673-hezbollah-takes-over-west-beirut-1