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What is behind Israel's attempt to ban Al Jazeera?

Does Netanyahu need a smoke screen for his corruption scandal or is there a more sinister reason for banning Al Jazeera?

Mark LeVine
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The present attempt by the government of Israel to close down Al Jazeera's offices in Jerusalem reflects a potentially far-reaching shift in the perceived power and role of critical media, not just in the Israeli occupation of Palestine, but across the Arab world and larger Middle East and North Africa.

The move is particularly odd since Al Jazeera and Israel have long had a symbiotic, if often adversarial, relationship. Despite long-standing and often harsh criticism of the Israeli occupation and its policies, Israel has afforded the channel relatively wide latitude in its coverage. There have been repeated grumblings over the years, and threats to close down its bureaus, but it hasn't prevented coverage and commentary by Al Jazeera's staff and contributing writers.

Or perhaps Israel is jumping on the bandwagon of the campaign against Al Jazeera launched by Saudi Arabia and the UAE?

It could be that Israeli media experts sense that the attacks on Qatar and Al Jazeera by so many other Arab governments are beginning to gain steam in the Arab public sphere, and thus Israel is trying, in its own twisted way, to support them, as a way of gaining favourable coverage in their official media.

Israeli Communications Minister Ayoub Kara has tried to justify the move by accusing Al Jazeera of causing Israel "to lose the lives of the best of our sons", adding "when we see that all these countries have determined as fact that Al Jazeera is a tool of the Islamic State [group], Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, and we are the only one who have not determined that, then something ludicrous is happening here." The ludicrousness of the charge that Al Jazeera is enabling the killing of Israeli soldiers is not relevant here; what matters is how Israel is trying to position itself as part of a larger, Arab-led, coalition against terrorism.

It also could be that the Israeli government has developed such good, and more or less open, relationships with Arab governments across the region that it no longer needs access to Al Jazeera's viewers. Perhaps the Israeli government has decided that it simply can do without communicating with Arab people directly, since both the rise of intense illiberalism, censorship and sectarianism have rendered such policies superfluous, and the changing mood in the Arab and official public spheres mean that many Arabs no longer even care about Israel or the occupation have equally rendered the exposure Al Jazeera afforded Israelis no longer important.

There is one other possibility, however: That Al Jazeera has become more dangerous than ever. The rise of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement to global prominence as a mechanism of worldwide resistance to the occupation has occurred, in good measure, because of the constant negative media coverage of Israel's intensifying grip on Palestine.

Among mainstream or major media outlets, few have been as successful and focused on placing the realities of the occupation before the court of world opinion as Al Jazeera and The Guardian. Thus, the attempt to shut it down now could be the result of a determination that its coverage is, in fact, seriously harming Israel's standing internationally, and, perhaps even more worryingly, that the government plans on engaging in actions in the near future - from another all-out assault on Gaza to the de facto or de jure annexation of significant territory in the West Bank - that it cannot afford to have covered in the critical manner that Al Jazeera would provide.

Whatever the reasons for the change in policy, the decision to force Al Jazeera from Jerusalem hints at a shift in Israeli strategic calculations that should worry anyone who cares not just about freedom of the press, but about the explosion of yet another Israeli-Palestinian war.