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Missiles Hit a Lebanese TV Station Hard

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — Israel has been unable to silence Hezbollah's television station, its powerful voice at home and in the Arab world, despite 11 days of bombing. But warplanes on Saturday did knock a Lebanese station often critical of the guerrillas off the air in parts of the country.

Lebanese Broadcasting Corp. TV appeared to have gotten caught in Israel's campaign to prevent Hezbollah from communicating among its fighters and spreading its word in a war that has played out on television to viewers across the Middle East — bumping even the violence in Iraq.

Three missiles leveled a transmission station in Fatqa, about 10 miles northwest of Beirut, leaving it a mountain of rubble and twisted antennas. The head of LBC's transmission center, Sueliman Chidiac, was killed.

Another airstrike crippled a transmission tower at Terbol in northern Lebanon, where relay stations for LBC, Future TV and Hezbollah's Al-Manar as well as cell phone towers are located.

Capt. Jacob Dallal, an Israeli army spokesman, said the target of the strikes was Al-Manar and Al-Nour, Hezbollah's radio station. He told The Associated Press that five of those station's antennas were hit.

"It's important to understand why the attack was carried out. This will disrupt their ability to communicate," he said, adding that cell phones were a "key communication link" for the guerrillas.

An Israeli military official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Al-Manar and LBC may have

been sharing an antenna.

LBC's terrestrial transmission was knocked out to homes in the surrounding portion of north-central Lebanon, though homes with satellite dishes received it without interruption.

Al-Manar continued broadcasting without interruption — as it has after repeated strikes on its facilities, except for one eight-minute break earlier in the week.

The top Arab satellite news networks, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, have become virtually all-Lebanon all the time, with correspondents across Lebanon, northern Israel and Jerusalem. In a region where people were riveted to the World Cup only weeks ago, they are now glued to the events in Beirut.

Even Iraq has taken a back seat. In recent days of heavy insurgent attacks there, "you had to stay focused for 15 minutes or longer on Lebanon before mention was made of Iraq" on Arab networks, said Jamal Dajani, who is director of Middle Eastern affairs at the U.S. satellite network Link TV and who monitors Arab TV channels.

LBC was an unusual target for Israel to hit. The private station — mainly Christian-owned and once the mouthpiece for the Lebanese Forces, a powerful Christian militia during the 1975-1990 civil war — is often critical of the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah. An LBC comedy show caricaturing Hezbollah's leader raised protests in June.

The criticism continued in the early days of Israel's offensive against Lebanon, launched July 12 after Hezbollah guerrillas captured two Israeli soldiers. But even on LBC it has been increasingly overshadowed by national solidarity as casualties grew in the bombardment.

"The message was that when south Beirut is hit, so is the north. When churches are hit, so are mosques. This is the issue we have to deal with now and then we will deal with the internal divisions later," Dajani told The Associated Press.

Al-Manar runs a constant stream of military music and images from the front, with guerrillas training and firing rockets — as well as street interviews with Lebanese denouncing Israel. It also posts announcements from Hezbollah's leaders — and its newscasts have gained a region-wide audience. The war gives it a chance to spread its image as a force fighting for the whole Arab world against Israel.

In Jordan, construction engineer Bassam Jibril said he depends on Al-Manar for "accurate reports" on the fighting.

"When the station carries a report quoting Hezbollah saying they will strike place 'x', a report soon after from Israel says place 'x' was hit by Hezbollah's rockets," he said.

In Lebanon, Prime Minister Fuad Saniora said he was not surprised by Israel's hit on LBC, one of the most profitable TV stations in the region.

"They want to blot out the voice of the Lebanese, and hide the truth from Lebanese citizens," he told reporters. "They want to impose a darkness on the country and its media."

— AP correspondent
Tarek El-Tablawy in New York contributed to this report.

