REPORTING WAR AND CONFLICT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by
Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui

TRT WORLD
research centre

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FOREWORD

This book on war coverage by the TRT World Research Centre is an invaluable addition to the literature on the topic. The book's personal and enlightening perspectives display a different side of conflicts and their many dynamics to the reader. This is especially so because of the fact that reporting on wars has always been a precarious endeavour, a fact that has still not stopped TRT World journalists from scouring the globe to deliver their journalistic mission. They have been to many diverse battlegrounds, including but not limited to: Syria, Palestine, Libya, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan. These countries have suffered from enduring conflicts that have unfortunately led to countless deaths and widespread destruction, with some conflicts having no end in sight. The journalists' primary purpose has been to report on the human stories that are oft-forgotten in the quagmire of war, with ordinary civilians taking the brunt of the impact.

War coverage is not a passive process, and many aspects are required to ensure that it is conducted responsibly. A narrative needs to be constructed, and TRT World journalists work tirelessly to discover the facts and define fast-moving events faithfully for their viewers. This is an important facet that characterises TRT World's overall aim of contributing "to the narrative of how stories are told and to provide new perspectives of thought". How events affect people on the ground are critical, with TRT World putting an "emphasis on the humanitarian angle of each

story, prioritising how the event influences the people rather than the stakeholders". This book embodies those sentiments. In it, journalists have documented their personal experiences in war reporting, hoping to inform readers of the effects of their coverage and the potential obstacles that can arise.

The characteristics of an individual journalist can also be important in war coverage. The personality, experience, education, and location of the journalist, all play a role in how a story is reported. Likewise, their knowledge of the social, cultural, and political background of the conflict, can help improve the standard of their journalism. As they become more abreast of the many nuances, they distinguish which stories are urgent and how to sift through the many sources of information. Countless risks are taken every day, and their bravery is only equipoised by their desire to perform their jobs effectively. Each journalist makes tremendous sacrifices when attempting to inform viewers on developments, including the high risk of becoming collateral damage in wars where often no one is held accountable. It is an admirable and challenging career, but it is also one that is pivotal and indispensable. By showing events on both sides, the international community is better informed to take proactive measures to bring an end to wars that have devastating consequences.

This book is also an effort to display the lessons learned by TRT World journalists, and to offer recommendations for news media outlets on best practice. Conflicts occur in complex regions where nuance is critical, and some media often fail to provide a balanced and faithful view of developments. Western coverage can be tainted by orientalist or jingoistic undercurrents, while regional outlets can sometimes resort

to binary constructions that neglect the facts. Conversely, TRT World journalists aim to go beyond the established agendas and the contest of narratives by using their journalistic acumen to report events as they truly occur. This book can help aspiring war correspondents understand the multifaceted nature of war coverage, and be better prepared for their own deployments. This can be rewarding, as there will always be a place for objective reporting, especially in the current environment where false or misleading information is pervasive.

Overall, war coverage is a crucial part of journalism. This book exhibits the personal experiences of TRT World journalists as they went about their jobs in different countries, and it also serves as an educational assessment of the various dynamics of war. That they aim for objectivity in their coverage is a testament to their desire for ethical journalism, and it is likewise a demonstration of TRT World's aim of facilitating honest perspectives, alongside war's humanitarian angle. Ultimately, this book is a valuable addition to the literature on the topic, benefitting casual readers, aspiring war correspondents, and policymakers alike.

İbrahim Eren,
Director General and Chairman of TRT

PREFACE

This book, compiled by the TRT World Research Centre, emphasises the importance of war coverage. It is a compilation of different personal accounts of TRT World journalists in their experience covering conflicts, such as in Syria or Kashmir. In providing a voice for the voiceless, TRT World journalists endeavour under dangerous conditions to uncover the truth behind the conflicts of today. There are many victims of war, and the consequences need to be highlighted through responsible journalism that allows viewers to be better informed. This is an indispensable role as it allows for the unravelling of events and provides a basis for the international community to understand and react to developments on the ground.

Objectivity is crucial for journalists attempting to faithfully report on conflict and its various dynamics. As a result, TRT World journalists aim to ensure that any potential biases are removed to provide an accurate view into fast-moving events, allowing the audience to make up their own minds. This is a fact that our team prides themselves in, as there will always be a place for journalism that is uninhibited by distorted agendas. Furthermore, the phenomenon of fake news, while not novel, has grown at a tremendous rate due to the proliferation of unaccountable mediums such as social media. This has only increased the importance of objectivity and news that represents events on the ground as they happen, and not how the outlet would have preferred them to happen.

The main aim of TRT World has been, and always will be, the delivery of high-quality journalism. The media environment has never been as competitive as it is today, increasing the value of outlets which offer ex-

cellent and truthful coverage. While war conditions are particularly difficult for journalists to gather reliable information safely, our team sees no obstacle that is too challenging. Indeed, the pressure has only led TRT World journalists to new heights to cover the world's many conflicts. This book exhibits that, and is an exceptional and personal testament to the many aspects that go into war coverage.

TRT World is an award-winning public broadcaster that acknowledges the value of an informed citizenry. It is one of the requirements of a cohesive society, and TRT World does its part by covering pertinent news every day. While media has become over-commercialised, TRT World strives to offer its viewers comprehensive and informative coverage that is free from the market forces from which many suffer. Increased knowledge that is rooted in an accurate understanding of current politics and policy also helps build a civic nation.

Overall, TRT World presents this book on war coverage as an invaluable contribution to the literature on the discourse. The unprecedented insights of journalists from the ground makes for an instructive read, with the consequences of war well defined. While this may not stop future conflicts from developing, decisions that have a wide-reaching impact should never be taken lightly moving forward.

Pınar Kandemir,
Director of Research and Training

EDITOR'S NOTE

Over the past forty years, global news television has been a critical feature of media coverage, particularly when it comes to war coverage. Large audience segments still rely on global news television as a central conduit to obtain their news and shape their worldviews.

The role of global news television has continued on the path started by major global news agencies two centuries ago. It is worth noting that AFP was founded in 1835 (under the brand name of Havas), while Reuters was established in 1851. Many experts assert that the framework of global news television is closely connected with the process of globalisation (Boyd-Barrett, 2000: 300).

The widespread acceptance of globalisation by the ruling elites throughout the world has precipitated patterns of worldwide connectedness through the consistent flow of people, trade, ideas, technologies, finance, social movements, and cross border movements etc. (Shome & Hegde, 2002: 174). Consequently, the phenomenon of globalisation has not only exponentially increased international trade and cultural exchange but has also profoundly transformed world societies and economies, as it has blurred, in many ways, political, economic and cultural boundaries.

With the planet digitally connected, television was for a long time, the primary source of foreign news for the majority of the population (Thussu, 2002: 203). Global television corporations capitalised upon this state of affairs and radically altered the news business. As a result, news became broadcasted 24 hours a day around the clock and in real-time. Also, it became live-event-oriented (Gilboa, 2002).

The genesis of global news television happened in the wake of the Gulf War of 1990-91. During that major international conflict, CNN became not only the channel of communication between the warring parties but also the instant chronicler of the conflict (Moisy, 1996: 7). The result was –as described by Time magazine- "an exceptional and perhaps unprecedented, live account of the start of the war from inside an enemy capital" (Zelizer, 2002: 71). CNN triumphed with that scoop, and its ratings probably exceeded a billion worldwide (Hall, 1997: 33). In the process, CNN outsmarted its over-spending competitors like ABC, which lost contact with its crew in Baghdad, and CBS, which could only provide studio comments and not first-hand accounts of war (The Economist, 1991: 26). At that point, CNN became known as 'the war channel' (Campbell, 2000: 11).

Since then, several international outlets have joined the global news broadcasting industry, competing with some of the more established and primarily Western news organisations. Networks from countries such as Turkey, Qatar, China, Russia, Brazil and others also started broadcasting via satellite in English, furthering their footprint worldwide.

This rising competition has managed to alter somewhat a deeply entrenched trend, namely the fact that global media outlets tend to echo primarily Western political, economic and cultural agendas. Such state of affairs was criticised by the UNESCO via the MacBride Report, which was published in the early 1980s. The report concluded that international communication was a one-way highway and called for more diversity, inclusiveness, and equality.

TRT World, Turkey's first English-language news channel, has been an integral part of this change. The channel has certainly filled an existing international communication gap. It has been proactively acting to promote international goodwill, spread awareness about key areas of interest, and clarify certain policy positions, which could – if left ambiguous – fan the flames of conflict and misunderstanding in an already volatile region.

Despite its recent inception, TRT World features in the same league as some of the pioneers of global news. A testimony to this feat is the courage and passion of the TRT World journalists and correspondents in the different theatres of war and conflict. Through their professionalism, the network has managed to position itself as an authentic voice for the global South, avoiding not only some of the stereotypical political and cultural representations disseminated by corporate mainstream news media but also by challenging them. Countries in the South, which include numerous nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, are highly

exasperated by the existing international economic and political order, and the widening gaps between North and South. In bringing an alternative voice, TRT World has managed to change perceptions and participated in setting the global news agenda.

There is no doubt that the media have a significant impact in conflict settings. Driven by robust journalistic codes, the media can "escape from the war propaganda trap of symbolically constructing armed conflicts as polarised, black and white, zero-sum games" (Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2008: 13). Such in-depth journalism and nuanced reporting are precisely what the TRT World reporters and correspondents aspire to offer to their international audiences.

In this book, some of TRT World's finest journalists, correspondents, newsmakers, and producers have outlined their experiences in various war zones and conflict areas. These insights are significant not just to understand the journalistic craft but also to grasp the complexities facing journalists as they report the stories. Through their narrator role, the journalist becomes part of the story. He/she defines what is at stake for the audience and frames the contours of the conflict at hand. Therefore, the various chapters of this book not only contribute to the existing literature on war reporting but also help us comprehend the multiple obstacles, internal and external, that accompany war reporting.

The first chapter by Dr Bora Bayraktar exemplifies the numerous intricacies and challenges faced by the war correspondent. Bayraktar belongs to a unique breed of Turkish journalists, who go the extra mile to report on a story. While he is currently the manager of TRT World's programmes department, he previously worked for various international and local news channels covering several conflict zones, ranging from Afghanistan to Kosovo. He spent 15 years reporting on the Palestinian

issue, interviewing some of the renowned Palestinian leaders, such as Yasser Arafat, as well as Israeli leaders, such as Shimon Peres and Netanyahu. It is clear from his journey that he is exceptionally passionate about his work, always striving to contextualise the conflicts he was assigned to, particularly Palestine.

Bayraktar's chapter offers a general overview of the Palestinian conflict from the prism of a seasoned correspondent at a particular junction. At the same time, the author narrates the difficulties and constraints he faced while covering one of the critical turning points of the Palestinian cause. This testimony is precious for emerging journalists and media professionals to grasp some of the root causes of this conflict and build on such expertise to hone their skills and understanding of the Palestinian predicament.

In the second chapter, Shamim Chowdhury, a seasoned journalist and war correspondent with a long track record for the international news broadcast industry, provides her account on some crucial episodes of the Syrian war. Particular focus was placed on the fall of Aleppo and the subsequent Turkish military operations, such as Operation Olive Branch and Operation Euphrates Shield, which came to protect Turkey's borders and clear the adjacent zones from terrorist activity.

While the Assad regime only granted access to those networks that were in sync with its theses, Chowdhury highlights the difficulties in operating in such an environment. The news outlets that opposed the Assad regime's narratives had to take incredible risks for their crews to report from the ground. Such hazards came at a heavy toll. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 137 newspersons were killed since the beginning of the uprising in Syria. However, for Chowdhury, the situation changed after Turkey's intervention, as she was able to cov-

er the situation in Northern Syria and shed light on the horrors of war and the destruction that these regions suffered under the yoke of the Assad regime, as well as the immense suffering of the populations at the hands of different terrorist organisations.

Syria is also the theme of Sara Firth's chapter. Firth is an accomplished war correspondent that regularly covers hot spots, including the wars in Syria and Libya. In her section, she offers a captivating take on some of the high risks that confront war correspondents in these locations, such as kidnapping. Firth's account contributes to the recurrent debate on war reporting, and particularly how to report a conflict objectively and safely.

By covering the region for a decade for different news outlets, Firth understands the layers of complexity that face the correspondent's duties every day. Knowledge of the terrain and in-depth appreciation of the roots of the conflict are only one part of the equation. The other part relates to his/her adherence to the journalistic code of ethics. Sometimes, as Firth succinctly reveals, the journalist's objectivity represents the best way out from the most dangerous situations.

In the next section, Tanya Goudsouzian, who came to TRT World with a solid track record in covering the Middle East and Central Asia, relates her own experience in Afghanistan. While this country continues to suffer from an 18-year war, reporting this war is particularly problematic as Goudsouzian explains. It combines issues of access, conflicting international agendas, and deep-seated local, national and regional mistrust, which continuously fuel the spiral of violence.

One of the fascinating aspects of Goudsouzian's account is her analysis of the gradual change of the narratives surrounding the Taliban. As the United States progressively withdraws from the country, the depiction

of the Taliban in Western mainstream media has slowly shifted. Goudsouzian explains the rationale behind this change while providing a context for the war in general and how the emergence of the so-called citizen journalism has given the Taliban an easy access to multiple podia.

Ali Mustafa is an international news correspondent with extensive experience reporting from conflict zones, such as Libya, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In his highly engrossing and compelling section, he captures the scene of one of the most heinous Islamophobic attacks that ever took place, namely the Christchurch terrorist attacks. This horrific assault, which took place on 15 March 2019, resulted in at least 50 casualties and many more injured. Even as the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern identified this episode as an act of terror, most Western mainstream media refrained from following her example, preferring to adopt the 'lone gunman' and 'shooting' frame.

Mustafa's testimony is an excellent tribute to the victims. He produces some of the most memorable and moving reports about the Christchurch terror attacks. His reporting stands in contrast to most Western mainstream media, which tends to follow an agenda dominated by talk of invasion and swarms to describe migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Unlike such chauvinistic reporting, Mustafa provides the deceased with background, humanises them, and focuses on the immense human cost that is still being paid today by their families and loved ones. By doing so, he places the victims at the centre of the coverage, paving the way for deeper inter-faith and inter-community understanding and harmony.

In the next chapter, Baba Umar, a senior producer at TRT World with a good track record in covering the Middle East and South Asia, provides his insights about reporting the Kashmir conflict. The latter has been one of the most protracted conflicts in modern history, and its roots date

from before the births of the two countries that have fought two wars over this territory, namely India and Pakistan. However, media coverage of the Kashmir dispute has been less than adequate, and most international media allocate little coverage to this prolonged dispute.

Therefore, Baba Umar provides essential elements to understand what is behind the headlines, and particularly the numerous impediments facing free journalism that are put in place by the Indian occupation. Such an important, yet oft-ignored, aspect that accompanies every occupation is the media war. The war of narratives and the control over semantics is of paramount importance to the occupying force, which strives to pass its messaging and control the masses by convincing them that any resistance is futile. In Kashmir, though, journalists are doing their utmost best to convey the truth, often at the cost of their lives.

All in all, this book is an essential step towards providing journalists and media professionals, who have extensive experience in covering some of the most dangerous hot spots in the globe, to share their vantage points on key events. More importantly, they share their insights into what happens behind the headlines, and the toll these conflicts are taking on human beings and journalists.

Tarek Cherkaoui,
Manager, TRT World Research Centre

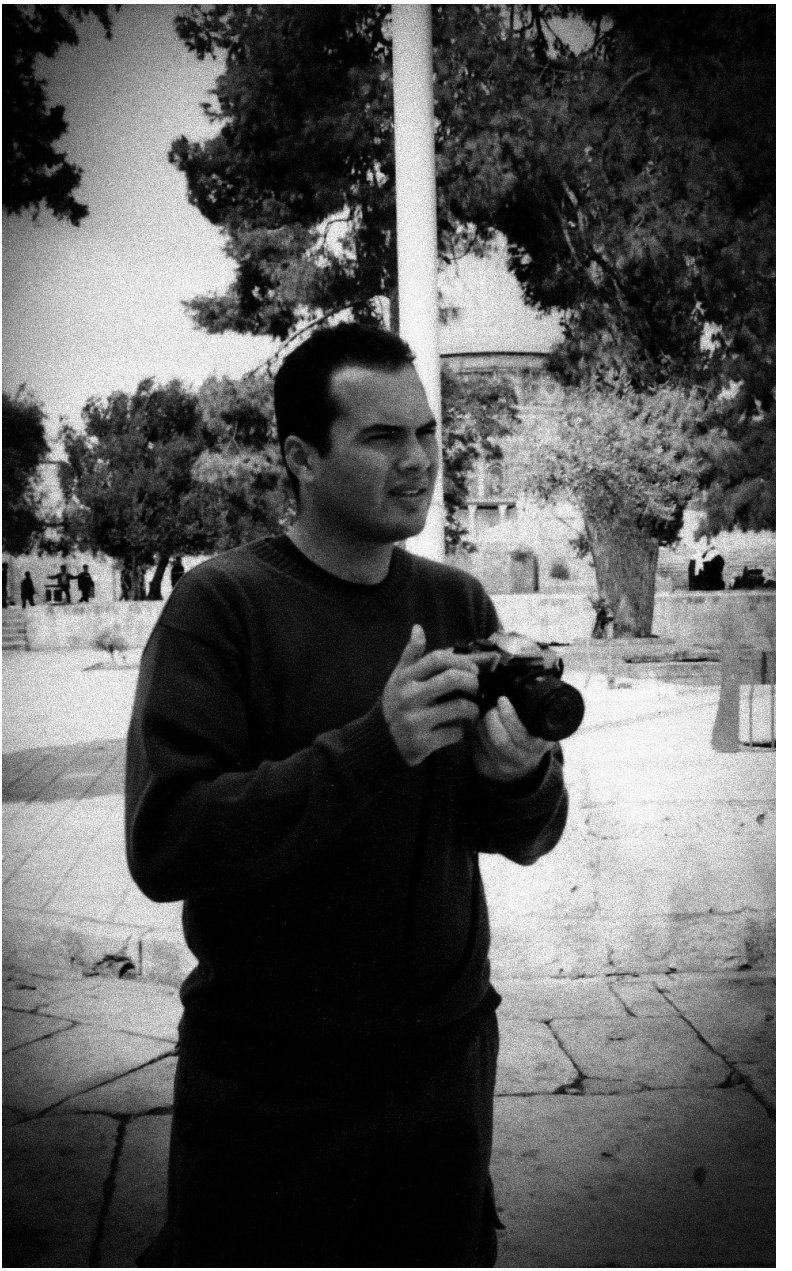
COVERING PALESTINE

1999 - 2013

BORA BAYRAKTAR

Covering war has always been a dream for journalists at the beginning of their career. Reporting from a warzone seems really cool, and a journalist who has this opportunity feels privileged. I was no exception to this when I joined a Turkish national television channel in 1995 as their international desk reporter. I was still a third-grade student of International Relations at university in Istanbul, and the job I started was directly related to what I studied at that time. My first days in the newsroom were spent covering the withdrawal of Serbs from Banja Luka in the Bosnian war, Chechen separatist leader Dzhokhar Dudayev's revolt[1] against the Russian army, and Israeli-Palestinian talks. This was when I started monitoring Palestine closely.

[1] Dudayev was a Soviet Air Force General who initiated a separatist movement in Chechnya during the last days of the Soviet Union. He was killed by an air strike on April 21st, 1996.



Bora Bayraktar In the compound of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem

The definition of my job was to write and edit television packages on a daily basis, using international news agencies' footage and information. Internet-based websites were very rare or very difficult to access due to the slow connection. Alternative sources of information like social media did not exist either. Mainstream media used a western-oriented narrative and presented cases according to their perspective. This sometimes distorted my understanding, but I was eager to learn more. I started reading more books to understand issues more in-depth than the rhetoric offered by some news networks with built-in agendas.

During the 1990s, Israel-Palestine was one of the top stories on the world news agenda. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were meeting mostly at the Erez border checkpoint. I was writing short news articles, getting to know the main actors, and getting familiar with certain places by looking at the pictures and following the negotiations. Simultaneously, violent incidents were taking place. An extremist Jewish settlers' horrible attack in a mosque in Hebron in 1994 was a huge blow to the Peace Process. Baruch Goldstein killed tens of Palestinians (official Israeli and Palestinian numbers vary) during a Ramadan morning prayer and triggered a blood feud. Radical Palestinian groups retaliated with suicide attacks against Israeli civilians, starting a cycle of violence. The extremists on both sides actually had a common goal: Killing the peace process.

In 1995, despite all these attempts to stop peace negotiations, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat reached an agreement, and their representatives signed a very important document known as the Interim Agreement or Oslo II, extending Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank. Although this agreement fell far short of Palestinian expectations, it was also too much for the Israeli right-wing. And they made it clear with a very bold move.

On November 4, 1995, when I was working a night shift, breaking news appeared on my computer screen stating "Rabin was shot." There were only a few international news televisions, and they started live coverage from the Kings of Israel Square in Tel Aviv (Now Rabin Square.) There was a huge peace rally there where Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had unknowingly given his final speech and had joined singers in their songs for peace. After the rally was over, while Rabin was walking to his car, a young man approached him and shot one of the most well protected leaders of the world. It did not take much for Israeli officials to declare the death of their Prime Minister. The murderer was not a Palestinian, as most people expected in the first moments after the attack. He was Yigal Amir, a Jewish settler who accused Rabin of betrayal because he "sold Holy Land." Amir's aim was not only to murder the Israeli Prime Minister, but also to kill the peace process. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said, "my partner was killed," reiterating his commitment to the peace process with Rabin's successor.

My interest in Israeli-Palestinian affairs soared after this incident. As a reporter, I was eager to go to Palestinian territories and cover the developments. After the assassination, a right-wing politician took over and Benjamin Netanyahu's policies further provoked the Palestinian side. His opening of new settlements in Har Homa, Jerusalem and starting excavations under Haram Sharif caused violent incidents. I increasingly became more attached to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as I followed these incidents on a daily basis, regularly watched the footage from Palestinian territories, and edited packages for the main news bulletins. My job helped me to understand the main parameters of the conflict and, in a way, encouraged me to study its history. Thus, I was prepared for my first assignment to Israel to cover the 1999 May elections in which Labour Party Leader Ehud Barak was challenging Likud Party Leader and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Mr Barak's campaign was based on a vague promise of peace, while Netanyahu was defending his hawk-

ish policy. My first mission before covering the conflict was to cover the struggle for peace. It helped me to understand the multifaceted dynamics of peace and war, which are interrelated.

First visit to the Holy Land

"Barak will bring peace," said my Israeli driver, when I first landed in Israel. But he had no idea about what he meant by peace. Indeed, I think Barak himself did not have a detailed idea either. The peace elected Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak discussed was vague and was far from the expectations of Palestinians. Israel was looking for security guarantees while Palestinians were working for an independent state based on the '67 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital. The gap between the two sides was wide, and the disappointment would potentially be devastating. Even as a junior journalist I could see that. Hope existed, but a road map to reach an acceptable solution was not forthcoming. My first visit to Jerusalem took place under these circumstances.

Palestine in the 1990s was completely different than it is today. Checkpoints were less visible, and tension was low. Driving from Jerusalem to Ramallah was possible within 15 to 20 minutes without interruption. The wall separating the neighbourhoods and streets did not exist, and neither did most of the checkpoints with heavy security measures at the entrance of Palestinian cities. Although on-going issues about the occupation conditions created problems from time to time, Israelis and Palestinians were more integrated. Palestinians were widely working in businesses in Israel, and the East Jerusalem Arab identity was strongly felt. The Old City smell of food, spices, and incense from churches diffusing in the narrow alleyways could easily make one feel as if they were in another world at another time. As if all the history, love, and pain were vested in the walls of the Old City. Al Aqsa Mosque and the Golden Dome

of the Rock, the places I used to see from agency footage while preparing television packages, stood tall with their grandiosity.

Breathing that air, feeling the tension, understanding the centrality of the holy places in world politics, meeting with prominent Israeli and Palestinian politicians, including Shimon Peres, at a very young age as a journalist further motivated me to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian question.

Dying Hope and road to violence

In July 2000, the Israelis and Palestinians met in Camp David under the auspices of U.S. President Bill Clinton to talk about final status issues; borders, status of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, and refugees. The talks lasted two weeks and, for the first time, the Israeli and Palestinian leaders discussed the status of Jerusalem. According to the Israeli narrative, Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered a state to Palestinians and was ready to make concessions about Jerusalem, but Arafat refused this "generous" offer – a word spread by the western mainstream media, televisions, news magazines, and papers. However, from the Palestinian point of view, this so-called generous offer was not something they could accept. The Israeli offer was short of the '67 lines, offered no sovereignty over the Haram Al-Sharif, and had nothing about the return of refugees. The offer was not an independent state; it was nothing more than limited autonomy. Palestine would continue to be under the full control of Israel, without fulfilling the minimum expectations of Palestinians. But lacking alternative media outlets, their voice was not heard enough.

Following the failure of Camp David Talks, I was assigned to cover Israeli presidential elections in Jerusalem. It was a great opportunity to observe the local mood in Israel and Palestine, obtain fresh comments from

prominent figures, and understand the reality on the ground for myself. I had the opportunity to talk to Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who was Arafat's aide at Camp David, and Faisal Husseini, a well-known Palestinian politician and a Jerusalem resident who joined official talks in the 1990s. Both men were optimistic about the future of negotiations because, although the talks failed at Camp David, for the first time, they said Israel had opened the Jerusalem dossier. Erekat told me that the talks will continue and that "if there is a will there is a way." Husseini was meeting with European diplomats when I visited him at the Orient House in East Jerusalem, which served as a Palestinian government office for years. In the Israeli Knesset, on the other hand, one could feel the anger against Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. He was under fire by the main opposition leader Ariel Sharon since he discussed the status of Jerusalem. For right-wing parties, Jerusalem was the "eternal and undivided" capital of the state of Israel and what Barak did was "unacceptable." Obviously, there was a big difference between the Israelis and Palestinians vis-à-vis the results of Camp David and the future of the talks. While Palestinians expected to discuss Jerusalem more and other issues, the feeling in Israel was the opposite. For them, putting Jerusalem into the equation was a terrible mistake and should have been corrected. The presidential election at the Knesset was proof of this negative atmosphere against Barak. His strong candidate, Shimon Peres, surprisingly lost against the opposition candidate Moshe Katsav.

One of the best things about journalism is that once you are in the field, you can independently observe, analyse, and feel. This assignment allowed me to see what was really going on in Israel and Palestine. Today, with the help of social media and more direct access to the field, it is easier to get the feeling without actually being there. Still, I believe in the benefits of walking in the streets, discovering different places, and actually talking to people directly to gain a clearer vision of the political situation in a country. To get an idea from ordinary people about their

thoughts on Camp David and the negotiations, I went to the Wailing Wall. Of course, the place I picked was packed with right wing, Orthodox Jews and, not surprisingly, they were very angry with Barak and his concessions. They had no sympathy for the idea of sharing holy places with Palestinians. On top of the Wailing Wall, the sentiment was no different. It is adjacent to Haram Sharif, where Al Aqsa Mosque and the Golden Dome of the Rock are located. I got there in the afternoon after a long day. Muslims were preparing for the sunset prayer. It was the last hours of a hot July day, with a nice breeze as the sun was going down. A young Palestinian in his late twenties was preaching to a small crowd. Although I could hardly understand Arabic, it was clear that he was talking about Jerusalem, its importance to Muslims, and the grace of fighting for the homeland. I felt the sorrow, anger, and determination in his voice. At that time, I strongly felt what was about to come to the Holy Land. When I got back to Istanbul, I told my boss that we should get ready for violence in Palestine.

Why we cover war

The news business is expensive, and competition is stiff. Even if you invest in stories that you believe in, success is not guaranteed. Media is a crucial part of democracy and it is one of the most effective ways of global political communication. Media is also a battlefield for narratives. States and leaders try to win public opinion and get support for the legitimacy of their actions. For news outlets, wars and other military operations offer a great opportunity to increase their authority, improve their credibility, polish their brand, and strengthen their impact. Having accurate information in times of crisis is critical for decision-makers.

The Israeli-Palestinian question has always been a sensitive issue, especially for the governments in the region. Any government that stays

indifferent to Palestine and Jerusalem will likely have legitimacy issues at home. Jerusalem is the third holiest place for Muslims. Turkey is historically attached to the region. It is also an issue for the Christian world. Ordinary people have concerns about the desecration of holy places, while the Israeli treatment of Palestinians and the situation of refugees represent a concern for human rights activists. For these reasons, monitoring developments in the Holy Land has always been crucial for regional governments.

In Turkey, private televisions started their operations in the 1990s. Many companies launched televisions and were in strong competition – especially in the news business. Managers saw a great opportunity to strengthen their brand by reporting from conflict zones around Turkey. Palestine was one of the most important issues for this competition. It was close to Turkey, and people from all political factions were interested in Palestine. Leftists had sympathy for the Palestinian struggle, and some left-wing political leaders had been trained in their camps. Muslims were also interested in Jerusalem, so ratings of news from this conflict were always promising.

My network started its broadcast in October 1999. So, when the Second Intifada broke out in 2000, it was considered a great chance for the brand to gain prominence by reporting from the hot spots. From an individual journalist point of view, although it is a great opportunity to develop your name, there are certain challenges, too. These challenges also vary depending on where you are from, which channel you work, and the environment in which you operate. In 2000, while the Turkish television business was competitive, it was far from international standards in terms of security of journalists. Most of the reporters were working for entertainment television stations' prime time main news bulletins, and the priority was ratings. For many news managers, what was more important was not getting accurate information and insight, but rather

good pictures and flare-ups. Consequently, the coverage of the reporters was superficial. Sometimes reporters concocted situations in which they were the subject of the story. Instead of reporting war, the suffering of the people, and what was happening in the region, they made it a spectacle. Competing with this was a big challenge for those who were trying to engage in decent journalism. In addition to this, Turkish news crews were very small, comprising only a reporter and a cameraman.

There are more challenges when covering the Israeli-Palestinian question. It is more than a conflict between two nations as it involves the religious sentiments of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Israeli officials can accuse one of being anti-Semitic at any time whenever one criticises the difficult living conditions under occupation or the mistreatment of Palestinians. Similarly, when you need to cover a suicide attack that targeted Israeli civilians, there is a chance that you could be accused of being pro-Israeli.

In addition to this, in 2000 in Turkey, the political atmosphere was problematic, as Turkey's relations with Israel became part of domestic politics. It was used against Necmettin Erbakan's conservative government when it was forced to step down by the so-called post-modern coup.[2] Indeed, a journalist had to walk a tight rope when covering the situation in Palestine.

[2] On 28 February 1997 Turkish National Security Council, dominated by military leaders, issued a memorandum against "anti-secular movements" and initiated a process that forced the government of conservative Welfare Party leader Necmettin Erbakan to resign. Under the pressure from military leaders, Prime Minister Erbakan signed the memorandum and many of Turkey's private Muslim institutions, businesses, schools and associations had to stop their activities. Prime Minister Erbakan resigned after a while and this episode became known in Turkey as the "post-modern coup."

Al Aqsa Intifada

On September 28, 2000, when the main opposition party leader Ariel Sharon visited Haram Al-Sharif to underline that he denied the so-called concessions given to Palestinians and wanted to ensure that Israel did not give up its claims on the holy places, he triggered a wave of protests in Palestine. Sharon was known for his responsibility in the Sabra and Shattila massacre in Lebanon in 1982, confirmed by an Israeli court in the past, and Palestinians regarded his visit as a provocation. The protests started at the courtyard of the Al Aqsa Mosque and Israeli soldiers killed many Palestinians.

On the following day, after the Friday prayers protests continued and spread to all Palestinian cities and mosques. Israeli soldiers used excessive force to suppress protests. People were killed every day, and their funerals subsequently set off more protests. A cycle of violence started, and the second Palestinian uprising known as the Al Aqsa Intifada began. I was sent to the territories once again to cover this conflict. My assignment was a combination of covering the dovetailing social unrest, military conflict and diplomatic developments. I was travelling to various cities in the West Bank, such as Ramallah, Nablus, Qalqiliya and Gaza, every day.

The Intifada basically meant Palestinian youth gathering in certain places of their cities where Israeli soldiers patrol. After a confrontation, they threw stones and challenged their authority. In return, Israeli soldiers came to the zone where they were confronted and used tear gas, plastic bullets, and even live ammunition from time to time to disperse the crowd. One of the first challenges for a journalist was to find a secure place to watch, film, and report about these clashes. It was a surreal experience. Palestinians were coming together, erecting barriers from scrap cars and waste containers. Israeli soldiers were shooting while the

cameramen filmed those who got shot. It was eerie to spot which protestors would be taken down by the Israeli soldiers next. Ambulances were waiting nearby and would take the wounded immediately to hospitals.

In the first days, I found that standing behind Israeli jeeps was more secure – if a stone hits me, it was more manageable than a bullet, which could be fatal. After a couple of days of covering similar protests, I understood that there were also disadvantages to my location. This is because when we were filming as described, in Ramallah in October 2000, Palestinians attacked so intensely that Israeli soldiers decided to get on their jeeps, put them in reverse, and leave the area quickly, leaving us in the cross-fire.

Another security issue was tear gas. There was no professional equipment for protestors as well as most journalists to protect themselves from the effects of Israeli tear gas. To breathe when everything went grey, Palestinian protestors used toothpaste or sniffed onions. I was not sure if those were helpful or not, but in any case my Palestinian driver in Ramallah was always propping a piece of onion to my nose.

In the first weeks of the Intifada, Israeli officials declared that they held the Fatah Secretary-General in the West Bank, Marwan Barghouti, responsible for the violence. He was accused of running a military organization called Tanzim and of supporting terrorism. To understand this man, I began following him in meetings and protests and interviewed him a few times. He denied all the accusations and said he would resist the occupation, which was his right by international law, and accused Israel of trying to silence him with these false allegations. Barghouti was regarded as one of the candidates who could be the next Palestinian leader after Arafat.

To get a more comprehensive picture, I did not miss any important protests or meetings in Palestine or Israel. Personally, I believe in order for

journalists to cover a war faithfully, they must be aware of the political and social developments, too. The slogans during the funerals or rallies discussed regional politics as well. "Al intifada mustamirra" (The intifada will continue) was a classic slogan. Palestinians also praised Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and Lebanese Hezbollah. When we look at the situation today, it shows how much things have changed since then. Iraq is no longer a player in Palestine and Hezbollah lost its credibility after supporting Bashar Al Assad in the Syrian civil war.

During the first days and weeks of the Al Aqsa Intifada, the Palestinian territories were full of journalists from all around the world. We were based in Jerusalem since we could go live and send our material via SNG trucks. It was easier doing it in there and staying in Jerusalem enabled our back-and-forth travelling to the West Bank and Gaza.

Journalists who cover conflict and war walk into trouble. When there is an explosion or something wrong, people try to run away from the scene; a journalist has to run the other way. I asked myself "what I am doing now?" a few times in such situations. Indeed, I will never forget an incident that happened one night in Jerusalem. On that day, my cameraman and I had worked all day in Ramallah as usual. We woke up early in the morning to make a live shot for the morning show, drove to Ramallah to cover a Palestinian's funeral, reported a clash between protestors and soldiers, and then got back to Jerusalem for another live shot for the main news bulletin at night. Subsequently, we went to our hotel room to get some rest. Not long after, we watched the news on Israeli air raids in Gaza City. I remember I then said to my cameraman Aydin: "We have to get to Gaza City before the bombardment is over." In the middle of the night, we passed the Erez crossing point and rushed to Gaza City as bombs were falling around us. The only fear you have when you cover a war story is missing the action. You know that if you survive, you will have plenty of time to think about "What did I do?" "Why did I do that?"

And then you will commend yourself for your courage and know that you would do it again.

Question of objectivity

Covering war is not only about military hostilities, explosions, and bombs. It is more about covering the suffering of the people in or near the warzone. Refugees, orphans, and the lack of food, water, clothes, and shelter are the real story. While bombings and destruction take place quickly, their impact lasts for weeks, months, and even years. Death can be a quick end to all sufferings but staying alive after one's home turns into rubble and bearing the premature loss of family members is intolerable.

In Palestine, one of the most striking experiences for me was visiting the refugee camps. Before visiting territories, I imagined refugee camps as big tent cities. But in the West Bank and Gaza camps are neighbourhoods. Millions of people live in camps and buildings that show the agonising life and suffering of refugees. Under these circumstances, a challenge for journalists is to decide on what is objectivity. While one side is living under the shadow of guns and miserable occupation conditions, and the other is using excessive force, is it possible to approach the story "objectively?" If you stay neutral in such a case, I do not think it would be fair. I think one lacks fairness if he or she approaches both sides as if they were equal when, in fact, they are not. Fair reporting is very important. So, when I covered the Israeli-Palestinian disagreement, I tried not to capitulate to the Israeli narrative and prioritize Israel's security needs but also consider the issue of occupation and mistreatment. However, concurrently, when Israeli civilians were targeted, I tried to report it accordingly.

As mentioned earlier, competing narratives are also a part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By using the media, parties try to build domestic and international consent for their future actions. The Israeli narrative has always portrayed the problem as a security issue with Israeli officials justifying their actions as self-defence, downgrading occupation conditions, and claiming that there was no partner to discuss peace. Regularly accusing Palestinians of terrorism was designed to silence their counterpart and their legal right to resist occupation according to international law. This became the strategy after the Camp David talks, too. The Israeli side put the onus of failure on Palestinians, and their rhetoric was "we gave everything to Arafat and made a generous offer, but Palestinians refused it," which meant, "Palestinians do not want peace, so we have to find a way for our security." So, the aim of the Israeli narrative was to facilitate a way to act unilaterally, neuter the process, and put the blame on Palestinians. And my aim as a journalist was to search for the truth.

In December 2001, the Israeli army besieged Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in his compound in Ramallah. The Ariel Sharon government took the decision on the basis that Arafat failed to stop attacks in Israel. The Palestinian leader condemned these attacks targeting civilians many times, but Prime Minister Sharon had already made up his mind. Arafat was portrayed as a terrorist mastermind by Israel. At that time, I tried to figure out if this was really the case and why the PNA Chairman refused the so-called generous offer during the talks at Camp David a year ago. After days of effort, I was able to get an appointment from Arafat's office, but I needed to walk through lines of Israeli tanks to get into the compound. Disregarding all the risks, we managed to get in. Arafat and his staff welcomed us as journalists from Turkey. In our interview, I asked him why he refused the Israeli offer. He explained the offer in detail, pointing places on a poster of Haram Sharif. He was offered no sovereignty over the Haram Sharif; instead, the deal stipulated Israeli

control of Palestinian borders, air space, and over the Armenian Quarter in the Old City. He said these were not acceptable to Palestinians or Christians, and asked, "Can you accept?" This version of the Camp David story became known after more than a year following the summit. However, Israel had used this time to reoccupy Palestinian territories, build checkpoints, and tighten its grip on the West Bank. My interview with Arafat was an important journalism success. After we completed the interview, we had another task of leaving the compound with our recording. My cameraman and I walked through the tanks again and walked kilometres in the rain to get out of Ramallah, which was locked down. We managed to overcome all the obstacles that night and sent our video to Istanbul, along with my interview with Israeli right-wing leader and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. My network broadcasted both interviews on the same day. We also heard Netanyahu's harsh criticisms against Palestinians. Overall, I think it was fair enough.

Life under curfew, Ramallah 2002

Palestinian territories turned into a war zone within a few months in 2000. Two Israelis, who were accused of spying, were thrown out from the windows of a Palestinian Police Station in Ramallah. Israel immediately bombed the building. Subsequently, the Palestinian security forces were declared an enemy by Israel. Israel began targeting notable Palestinian leaders, including Abu Ali Mustafa, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Palestinian radical groups started a suicide-bombing wave in Israel as retaliation. Indeed, it was a difficult time for journalists. After hopefully following Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for years, it was hard to believe talks were over, and that the region had entered a new cycle of violence. I define this period as Israeli unilateralism, and behind this was Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Sharon's vision was well known and unambiguous. He wanted to end the peace process, reoccupy the West Bank, draw the borders according to Israel's security needs, and impose his will by changing facts on the ground.

In 2002, another escalation took place. Following a series of suicide bombings, Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield. Israeli troops entered Palestinian cities and attacked Arafat's compound. As a journalist, I was in Palestine once again to cover the operation. I reported from the outskirts of Bethlehem as the Israeli army was preparing to enter. Israeli soldiers were praying, and nearby supporters harassed foreign journalists as they thought they all supported Palestinians. Palestinians inside the city were praying too – not to be hurt by Israeli soldiers.

Ramallah was declared a military zone and was cordoned off. As a group of foreign journalists, we came together near the Qalandiya checkpoint at the outskirts of Ramallah. My team, along with some Spanish journalists, tried to approach the Israeli military post to ask if we could enter the city. We showed our accreditation cards given by Israeli authorities. The reply we got was bullets; Israeli soldiers shot at us and forced us to go back. We decided to find a vacant spot between the military lines and, from an empty field, walked into the city. It was a very risky moment given the mood of the Israeli soldiers, but luckily no one attacked us, and we went into Ramallah to a television studio to make live shots directly from the occupied city. There was a curfew, and we could not go out until the lockdown was over. We spent two weeks in that studio with a group of western and Arab journalists. There were times when Israeli tanks moved close to our building, conducting operations and firing shots, and we were waiting, worried. A few times Israeli soldiers intimidated journalists, raided media buildings, and broke equipment. Nobody wanted to relive this experience.

My cameraman and I dared to go out occasionally to film empty neighbourhoods, running into Israeli patrols in dust-covered streets. I witnessed Palestinian youngsters cuffed, leaning on the ground or a wall, under the watch of Israeli troops. While we wondered about their fate, we tried to report the situation from Ramallah. Although I do not smoke, I remember that I lit one after we ran across an Israeli tank near Arafat's compound and it slowly pointed its gun to our vehicle, making us wait for a while. Roads were blocked by rubble and tanks flattened cars, usually unnecessarily. When U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell came to visit Arafat to ease the tension, many journalists rushed to the compound despite the curfew. Israeli military troops and tanks surrounded it. One Israeli soldier stopped our car to check our IDs and said, "Welcome to Israel," expecting us to smile.

During a month-long siege, Israeli forces offered a three-to-four hour break every four days so that people could go out and purchase essentials. They were very valuable for journalists to film, get people's opinions and thoughts, and feel the mood. At the same time, like the Palestinians, you had to get what you needed, like food and clothes. Once, I remember Israeli soldiers fired at me as a warning not to walk close to them. Moreover, when we were filming, we were very careful not to be targeted by snipers, walking near the walls of buildings and attempting to work speedily. We did not have time to worry about the quality of our shots. During the day under curfew, we had a lot of time to discuss our views about the issue with our colleagues. Watching the news, smoking hubble-bubble, and joking and discussing were the only activities. Sleeping on the floor was not easy, but for a journalist to be there when all the world was watching from far away was priceless. We had to keep up not only our physical strength but also our mental health. The uncertainty, not knowing how long it would continue and what would happen next, always made things more difficult.

The 2002 operation was actually an open war against Palestinians, and its political aim was to discredit Arafat, remove him from the political and diplomatic scene, kill the peace process and make agreements meaningless, turn the Palestinian question into a security issue for Israel, and allow Israel to implement its planned unilateral steps. One of the most controversial policies was building walls around Palestinian cities, which made life more difficult for Palestinians by limiting movement, discouraging them from working in Israel, and determining borders and the status of Jerusalem by altering the facts on the ground. Israel used the word "fence" to define the wall to make it more acceptable for the international community. Even politicians like Peres, who was considered a "dove," supported the "fence."

With support from U.S. President George W. Bush, Arafat was side-lined. Sharon consequently wanted to strike a deal with Mahmoud Abbas, forcing him to accept his version of peace and deny Palestinians the right to return. A summit was held in Aqaba in 2003, but it was not enough to stop the Palestinians' resistance. Ariel Sharon adeptly used the suicide attacks to legitimise his actions. For most ordinary Palestinians, the waves of attacks against civilians by hawkish groups were a big mistake that delegitimised their rightful resistance because they provided a basis for Israel to use harsher methods. At that time, a journalist covering suicide attacks without harming the resistance rights of Palestinians was a challenge. I interviewed a young Israeli student who lost her ability to walk due to a suicide bombing attack at Hebrew University to display that we wanted to show the full picture of the conflict. Likewise, I did a package on the story of a café on Ben Yehuda Street, which was targeted three times and where several people got killed.

In 2004, Sharon continued the assassination of Palestinian leaders. Missiles from Israeli helicopters killed Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmed Yasin and his successor, Abdelaziz Rantisi. Arafat also died in November that

year; according to most Palestinians he was poisoned. His funeral was a farewell to old times, and his death left the future of the Palestinian cause in question. All political factions, including long-time rival Hamas members endorsed Arafat's legacy. Hamas members went to the extent of chanting "Shaheed Al Quds" (Martyr for Jerusalem) in his memory. This was to honour his stance at Camp David and his refusal to give up Jerusalem by saying that "I will not be the Arab who gave up Jerusalem."

The assassination of important leaders was in preparation of the Israeli government's pulling out from Gaza. In 2005, Ariel Sharon decided to disengage from Gaza. He decided to dismantle 21 settlements in the Strip. It caused great controversy in Israel and right-wing politicians criticized Sharon heavily. Sharon was a strong supporter of settlements, and he was regarded as the "father of settlers." He was, in a way, excommunicated by his party Likud, and decided to leave his party and establish a new one under the banner of Kadima. I entered Neve Dekalim, the biggest settlement in Gaza, at midnight together with the Israeli army. Settlers were praying, cursing Sharon in grief. They called the Israeli army "Nazis" and resisted. They even watered the lawn as if they would not leave their homes at all. Settlers accused Ariel Sharon of betrayal, but soldiers reluctantly did their job. The evacuation took all day long while Palestinians celebrated the Israeli withdrawal as a historic victory.

The Gaza disengagement boosted support for Hamas. After the death of the leaders, Palestinians went to elections early in January 2006. I was assigned to cover these historic elections. I travelled to Palestinian cities in the West Bank and picked Gaza City for the election day. There was a competition between Fatah and Hamas for years, and they were competing for seats again this time. Hamas was regarded as a terrorist organization by Israel, and their participation in elections became an important international issue at that time. But they were committed to the political process and planned to show that they could run govern-

ment offices to the world. I interviewed many Hamas and Fatah leaders during the campaign. My impression was that international media was downgrading the possibility of a Hamas victory. This is because Hamas rallies were dynamic and energizing, while Fatah seats were empty. The result ended up being as I expected. Covering elections in Palestine was essentially no different to covering armed conflict, with Hamas members celebrating victory by shooting their AK 47s in the air. Indeed, there were very tense moments when I was making rooftop live shots while Hamas members celebrated down the street.

Final words

For me, covering Palestine at a very critical junction in history has been a privilege. Meeting with historic figures, being in the middle of a global crisis, and understanding, reporting, and talking about it has been a unique experience. It was a great challenge to compete with colleagues and other networks and trying to maintain fairness and quality, but also trying to be on the right side of history. Deciding when to include emotions in the story, or when to stay calm and act with reason, are of critical importance. To be able to use one's cultural and intellectual background, benefit from one's studies, and be rewarded for one's commitment, has been gratifying.

Overall, if we go back to the main question: Why would a network send a journalist to a conflict zone? What can a correspondent offer? I think the answer is clear: Managers expect their journalists to express what agencies and other networks cannot, or do not. They trust their journalist's courage and their professionalism, and in the end, want a true perspective of the story from on the ground.

SYRIA'S SWAN SONG

SHAMIM CHOWDHURY

The January air was crisp and bracing. At Turkey's Oncupinar village near the southern town of Kilis, a few dozen Syrians lounged around languidly. Women in long, dark abayas shuffled nervously; men in dust-smeared padded jackets smoked cigarettes and squinted in the sunlight. What were they waiting for? News of their relatives, perhaps? A few words of reassurance that their parents and children were still alive? That family members had not been buried under a mountain of debris and rubble in the aftermath of the latest airstrike? It was hard to tell; few were willing to speak. The enduring fear and despondency their eyes betrayed served as a warning to us. We instinctively knew not to get too close or to probe. It felt disrespectful somehow, as if by asking questions we would only compound their suffering.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Every so often, trucks would pass by – some leaving Syria, others going in. Most of them, we were told, were delivering aid. The rest were transporting all manner of goods as part of the last vestiges of cross-border trade that had somehow managed to survive despite the turmoil from time to time we would spot an ambulance taking the sick and injured to a nearby hospital. We would catch fleeting glimpses of the passengers, mainly fighters, leaning heavily backwards, exhausted, in pain. Then they would be gone, the ambulance speeding towards its destination without a moment to lose. Still, it was enough to feed our imaginations and give us a tiny sense of what was going on just a few kilometres from where we stood.

Above us, the candy-floss clouds drifted languorously along the clear blue skies, exuding a tranquillity that belied the chaos, violence, and destruction below. My team and I had been at the border since early morning, broadcasting live every hour, updating our viewers about the latest in the fighting and the humanitarian crisis that was unfolding. It was 2016. We had been doing this every day for several weeks. The war, at least in Syria's Aleppo region, had gained significant momentum since Russia joined six months earlier, and the regime was on the verge of recapturing the area. This was, therefore, one of our top stories on most days.

Russia's involvement in Syria was a turning point in a war that had for the previous four and a half years entangled itself into a stalemate of sorts. Over the past few years, Daesh had taken over large parts of the north, and the YPG– the Syrian branch of the PKK terror group – had also taken advantage of the situation by expanding its territory. That aside, opposition and regime forces had gained and lost ground in more or less equal measure, so that, by early 2015, the net gains for either side was relatively inconsequential. Russia's involvement changed all that.

Within months, the Syrian regime, with the help of pro-Iranian militia and Hezbollah fighters on the ground, started gaining the upper hand and was pushing decisively and steadily into lost territories.

At one point the advance was so rapid that we could actually see Russian fighter jets flying above us. They would have been some distance from the border, but the fact that they were visible from southern Turkey left us in no doubt about Russia's military might. There was no way opposition fighters, equipped mainly with small arms and home-made explosives, could compete with what appeared to be a relentless air bombardment, much of it hitting densely populated civilian areas.

For those of us reporting on the fast-moving events, the battle for Aleppo posed numerous challenges. It was out of the question for TRT World to report from inside Syria, and not just because it was far too dangerous (some journalists working alone, however, were doing just that, as were others who were working for outlets such as *Vice*. Others still, in particular those affiliated with Russian and other networks sympathetic to the regime, had entered Damascus through normal channels with full permission and therefore had better access, if not to civilians living in opposition-held areas, then certainly to parts of the front line). At the time, several countries had taken a very clear political position on the war. They had pledged their support for moderate opposition groups, were arming them and were pushing for regime change.

With this in mind, it would have been impossible for us to report from inside the country, even from relatively safe positions. Therefore, as regime forces continued to penetrate the Aleppo countryside, we found ourselves, along with many other news channels, standing at the border trying our best to get as many accurate news lines as possible. In situations like this, where the limitations of reporting are obvious, every

comment we make on air must come from sources that are verified and trustworthy. Reuters, Associated Press, and Agence France Presse are the agencies many broadcasters turn to, and ones that do not always require attribution. TRT World's policy, however, is to not go with any line unless two major agencies are reporting the same development. But while this cross-referencing goes a considerable way to eliminate inaccuracies, it does not give any broadcaster a competitive advantage when it comes to adding something new to the story.

One of the challenges of war reporting in the 21st century is the emergence of many more news outlets than ever before. A myriad of new English-language channels – some as state broadcasters, others that are privately-run – are now competing with online-only news providers, making it all the more critical for journalists to provide accurate, objective, and contextualised news if they want their channel to have any kind of authority on a given narrative.

This is where TRT World's own sources came in. We did, of course, receive regular updates from the various Turkish government ministries, but our close relationship with the country's numerous humanitarian agencies working with internally displaced Syrians, as well as refugees, proved invaluable. Our contacts would inform us of the humanitarian situation and aid distribution either by directly contacting the field producer on the ground or our colleagues on the Middle East Desk. They would then relay the information to us so that we, in turn, could report them with total confidence.

Nevertheless, when it came to reporting frontline hostility, there was one type of source we could not do without – activists inside Syria. TRT World's Middle East Desk comprises a handful of people who not only have in-depth, specialist knowledge of the region, but have also, over

the years, cultivated excellent contacts with activists inside Syria. We would only use these contacts once their credentials had been meticulously checked, after which we would receive regular updates on the fighting, exclusive interviews with civilians and fighters, unseen footage, and other material that went on to become the backbone of many of our regular reports, often giving us the edge over other broadcasters. Often, the activists would willingly risk their lives in order to get the material out, in the knowledge that, without their input, the voice of the ordinary people of Aleppo would remain unheard in what had become an aggressive war of information as much as anything else.

The activists' updates proved vital when it came to deciphering what was happening inside Aleppo city. The west of the city had always remained under the control of regime forces, but opposition fighters were clinging on to the east, most of which was under siege, with Bashar al Assad's forces cutting off supply lines with the aim of starving the fighters out. Caught amidst all of this were millions of civilians, trapped and at risk of starvation and sickness. Over the course of the months leading to the fall of Aleppo, however, we managed to speak to many of them as they told us of the horrors and helplessness of daily life.

There was also another potential news source that proved problematic and useful in varying degrees: social media, in particular, Twitter. In many ways, one of the defining features of war reporting in the 21st century has been the widespread use of social media to disseminate information. Its limitations are obvious. Unverified information, propaganda, and even downright untruths were – and still are – prolific on the internet. The easy option would be to ignore all of it, but complications arise when, interspersed with the cyber-garbage, are nuggets of incredibly important information. The challenge thus lies in the filtration process, and admittedly there are times when the temptation is to

broadcast information on social media as truth. But this is a temptation that must be resisted at all times. As a general rule, TRT World does not touch anything on social media posted by unknown sources unless it has been verified by the Middle East Desk and management have given us express permission to broadcast it. In particular, this was a golden rule when reporting Aleppo. The complexity of the story was largely due to the numerous parties involved, each of them with their own agendas and this, we discovered, proved to be fertile terrain for what is now commonly termed as 'fake news.'

We discovered, however, the constraints of reporting the battle for Aleppo from the Turkish border need not be as restrictive as we had assumed. It is true that the few Syrians we encountered were mainly elusive, but there were moments when we were reminded of how a bit of journalistic acumen goes a long way, even when little seems to be going on in the vicinity. Nothing illustrates this better than a group of young Syrian boys who scurried to and from Syria by crawling under the fences that divided the two countries braving numerous dangers.

But these were not the simple, innocent antics of mischievous young rascals seeking fun and adventure; the boys, some of them as young as nine, were risking their lives in order to survive. At the Turkish border, they would sell basic items and carry out other simple tasks in exchange for cash, with which they would then buy food. They told me they had been living in the refugee camp near Syria's Bab Al Salam border since their villages had been destroyed by Russian airstrikes. They said that, before the war, they used to go to school. But then they saw their family members die. These young boys appeared fearless, but this was not a fearlessness to be celebrated; it developed less from valour and more from how the war had desensitized them and stolen their childhood.

The boys' story was a stark illustration of the brutality of war. But it was also a reminder that war reporting, no matter how much it has changed over the years, should still, at its core, be about people. No amount of social media analysis can ever replace real journalism: storytelling. Giving the people directly affected by war a platform to tell their stories allows a continuous flow of unique perspectives, and this alone will continue to transcend many of the challenges journalists face today.

By the spring of 2016, it became inevitable that Aleppo would fall. In the end, a battle that had begun in July 2012 ended exactly four years later. Several small pockets of the city would remain under rebel control for a few more years but, for all intents and purposes, Aleppo was back in the hands of the regime. Once Syria's most populous city, a majestic trading hub steeped in history and culture, Aleppo was now all but flattened. Its ancient citadel remained mostly intact, but many of its Ottoman-style mansions and courtyards, narrow alleys, covered souks, and UNESCO World Heritage sites lay in ruins. I remember visiting these places as a tourist a few years before the war started, and to see them destroyed was heart-breaking. Whatever the opinions about the morality of the various entities in the war, there could be no denying that the level of destruction and magnitude of human suffering was unpalatable for anyone with a conscience. The UN described it as a complete meltdown of humanity, apportioning the blame squarely on the regime, Russia, and Iran and its militia.

TRT World continued to follow events from the border and produced reports – or packages – every day. But once Aleppo had fallen, we had little means of reporting what was happening to the people left inside. We received reports of rape, torture, and even killings by regime forces, but with our sources largely silenced, it became increasingly difficult to get information out. Despite these limitations, the Syrian war remained

one of TRT World's top priorities for several years to come. Battles were still taking place on a number of fronts. All attempts to reach a diplomatic solution appeared to be failing. Five years on and with millions of people killed or displaced, the Syrian war showed little signs of ending.

Turkey's security challenge

The thunderous roar of the howitzer ripped through the afternoon silence. Boom! Another one. Then another. And another. They were coming from all around us, deafening, sobering, zipping across the border into Syria. In the distance, plumes of black smoke curled their way upwards, transforming the lilac-tinted afternoon sky into a bleak, leaden blanket. Operation Peace Spring was underway. It was October 9 2019, and we had been expecting this moment for days. We had arrived at Turkey's southern border a few days earlier, the day after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that the cross-border anti-terror operation was imminent. His plan was to clear an area, 120 kilometres wide and 30 kilometres deep, of the YPG, stretching from the Euphrates River to the Iraqi border. This safe zone, he said, would not only ensure Turkey's security along parts of its border but it would also eventually enable two million Syrian refugees to resettle there. It was a bold decision and one that had not been taken lightly. In the months leading up to the operation, Turkey and the US had been in talks to create the jointly controlled safe zone, but with the latter taking few steps to honour its commitment, Turkey felt it was left with little choice but to take decisive action.

Although not much had happened for several days following the announcement, it was apparent that preparations were underway. We

saw convoys of armoured vehicles and tanks pass along highways and streets amid the cheers of local people before positioning themselves around the border towns of Akcakale and Ceylanpinar. We also witnessed dozens of coachloads of fighters belonging to the opposition Syrian National Army, which comprised the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other opposition fighters, entering Turkey in the dead of night, cutting across the country, and re-entering Syria. This was the only way they could reach the areas that were about to be cleared. Travelling cross-country inside Syria through YPG-controlled territory was, for obvious reasons, out of the question. We had even entered Syria several times – obviously not into the parts targeted in the forthcoming operation, but further west into Afrin and areas that had been liberated in previous campaigns. Here, we had been given exclusive access to a training session carried out by the Al Hamza brigade, an elite group of Syrian fighters who were about to go into battle. All this was plainly leading up towards one event, but when the actual moment arrived, it took us by surprise nonetheless.

I was standing a few meters from the Syrian border and about to do a live broadcast from Akcakale when I noticed my phone's 3G signal had gone down. My colleagues noticed the same. It turned out all communications networks had been blocked across a 50-kilometre radius. It could only mean one thing. We hurriedly put on our safety gear and waited.

We did not have to wait long. Within half an hour Turkish tanks started firing long-range artillery at YPG positions in and around the Syrian towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. It took a few moments to sink in, but once it did, I and the dozens of other journalists who had travelled from across the world knew exactly what we had to do. There was not a moment to lose. We had to get on air. But of course we could not. All

3G and other wireless networks were still down, and we did not have a satellite dish. I quickly recorded what is known as an as-live. I stood in front of the camera and recorded an update of events which could later be sent to our news centre and aired. But with no way of receiving any information, it was impossible to give a comprehensive picture, so instead I described what I had seen and heard. The next challenge was how to feed it to Istanbul. There was only one solution. We dashed into our car, sped out of town, and kept driving until we finally received a signal. It was still too weak for a live broadcast so, an hour after the shelling started, I gave our channel its first live frontline update on Operation Peace Spring by phone. We fed the as-live and drove straight back to Akcakale, where we managed to secure slots on a satellite truck. It allowed us to broadcast live throughout the night. By now the phone networks were back up, which meant we had the latest information at hand, including the fact that F16 fighter jets were taking off from the cities of Diyarbakir and Konya.

However, there was another problem. The YPG had started firing mortars into Akcakale and the nearby border towns of Ceylanpinar and Nusaybin. On that first day, at least seven mortars hit Akcakale, some of them landing just streets away from where we were standing. A Syrian baby boy, Muhammad Omar, was killed in one of the attacks.

The challenges of reporting this story were obvious. There was little chance of us being hit by Turkish artillery but every chance of getting caught up in a mortar attack. If that happened, there was no guarantee our safety gear would protect us completely. But short of abandoning the story, which we were not going to do, there was little we could do apart from hope for the best. The other problem was the communications blackout, which lasted several hours. It made it very difficult for us; not only to broadcast but also to gather the latest updates. Finally, it

was impossible to report from the other side because it was too dangerous and, as in the case of Aleppo, there was no way the Syrian regime would have allowed us to enter those areas. Unlike Aleppo, we had few contacts inside YPG-held territories, which greatly restricted our ability to gather reliable information.

Operation Peace Spring lasted just over a week, but during that time nearly 1,000 mortar shells and rockets were launched at Turkey, killing 20 civilians. It ended following a meeting between Erdogan and US Vice President, Mike Pence. The US had been widely criticized for pulling its troops out of areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – made up largely of the YPG - which it saw as its main ally against Daesh in the region. Now, the Trump administration was being accused of abandoning the group. Added to this, Washington's links with the SDF had caused a profound and lasting schism between it and Turkey, a NATO ally, due to the fact that Ankara regards the YPG as the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organisation.

Erdogan and Pence agreed to a 120-hour ceasefire, which later, with Russia's agreement, became permanent. By then, Turkey had achieved most of its aims as far as its military campaign was concerned and had agreed to jointly patrol parts of the area with Russia. Indeed, it was a scenario that was further complicated by the fact that the remaining YPG terrorists were by now being aided by Syrian regime forces who had entered the area.

Peace Spring was short and swift, but Turkey's previous military campaigns had lasted longer. The justification for both Operation Euphrates Shield, which began on August 24 2016 and went on for seven months, and Operation Olive Branch, which started on January 20 2018 and lasted 58 days, was the same. Turkey had long decried the security threat

posed by Daesh and the YPG along its 911-kilometre southern border. Over the years, more than 100 rockets and missiles had hit the border towns of Kilis and Hatay. Added to this, around 300 civilians had been killed in attacks claimed by Daesh. Citing its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN charter, Turkey believed this was a compelling reason for needing to protect its borders.

There was also another reason. By 2016, Turkey was hosting around 3 million Syrian refugees (now 3.6 million). This proved to be a massive strain on the country's resources at a time when it was suffering from an economic downturn. The situation was not helped by the EU which, despite the fact that it had not paid Turkey its dues according to their agreement, was continuing to put pressure on Ankara to keep the refugees away from Europe's shores. Therefore, part of the reasoning behind the military campaigns was to drive terrorist groups away from parts of northern Syria in order to create safe areas where the refugees could return to.

Whatever the opinions concerning the merits of Turkey's decision, one thing was for certain: as journalists working for a Turkish organisation, we were among the first to enter the cleared areas. In an increasingly competitive industry, this unprecedented access gave us a significant advantage over other international networks. However, with that advantage came responsibility. It meant we had an even greater moral duty to ensure the previously untold stories of those who had lived through the horror of Daesh and the YPG were told faithfully and with compassion and sensitivity.

Operation Euphrates Shield was Turkey's biggest intervention since the Syrian war began. Within a week of the start of the campaign, the

Turkish army and the FSA liberated the border town of Jarabulus, which Daesh had overrun two years earlier.

We visited Jarabulus several weeks after it had been cleared, travelling from the Turkish town of Karkamis as part of a military embed. Along the road leading to the town, row upon row of flattened buildings lay as a testament to Jarabulus' tragic past. When we arrived, we discovered large parts of the town had been razed to the ground. The people were hungry. The shelves in the few shops that were still standing were empty. Parts of the town had yet to be cleared of booby traps and explosives planted by Daesh. Yet, we also saw hope. Turkish aid agencies were providing food, and new hospitals and schools had already been built. The mayor of the newly formed council told us the town's electricity had been restored. The locals were enjoying the simple pleasures that had been denied to them for so long: women were walking the streets without fear, children were running around, playing and squealing with innocent excitement. Some of them told us about life under Daesh. They spoke of public executions, fear, and torment. We recorded everything so that we could reveal to the world how these people had suffered.

We saw similar destruction when we visited the town of Jindires during Operation Olive Branch. Once home to Kurds and Arabs alike, the YPG had taken it over some years back. Then, in March 2018, as the Turkish army and FSA approached, most of the residents fled in order to escape the fighting. But one woman remained. Her name was Fatma Bastas. She had nowhere else to go. She told us the YPG had tried to recruit her widowed daughter, so she went into hiding. But she got caught in the crossfire and was killed. Her body still lay under the rubble. She left behind two young sons; Fatma was now their sole carer.

Jindires was littered with landmines that had been planted by the YPG. We watched as the Turkish army clearing them using trained sniffer dogs and metal detectors — a job that required patience and precision. We witnessed how, when the soldiers came across a mine, their detectors would emit a shrill sound. The dogs would then confirm it – without getting too close – and the mines would then be detonated.

Around the town, the bullet-scarred walls of many of the houses spoke of raging battles that had taken place in areas that had been heaving with ordinary people. We climbed down into the dank cellars the YPG had built in order to take shelter during air raids. We saw gaping holes with jagged edges in the walls, large enough for adults to crawl through. We learnt that the YPG used them to move from house to house without being detected. We tried to imagine how terrifying all this must have been for the people living here. But how can anyone who has never experienced such unspeakable horrors ever begin to understand?

On the day we visited Jindires we received news that the Turkish army and the FSA had liberated Afrin city, which was situated around 20 kilometres north-east from where we were. This was a major development for Operation Olive Branch. As the largest city in the Afrin district, its liberation effectively signified a resounding victory for Turkey and the FSA. But it did not come as a huge surprise. The FSA had already taken control of the highway that runs from Jindires to Afrin city, so clearing the urban centre had been just a matter of time. As always, upon receiving the news we knew exactly what to do. My cameraman managed to pick up a strong signal on his 3G kit. The newsdesk and Middle East Desk gave me all the information I needed, which I consolidated with what I had witnessed in Jindires. I made a few notes, formulated some thoughts, and within minutes TRT World was the first international

news channel to go live on air from inside Syria reporting on the recapture of Afrin City.

Operation Olive Branch enabled us to gain an intriguing insight into how the YPG operated. On one occasion we visited a large training camp in Afrin, which the group had abandoned after it had been hit by an airstrike. What we discovered was nothing short of extraordinary. An intricate network of tunnels ran along the peripheries of the camp; an enormous underground maze that was at least eight feet deep and reinforced with concrete, much of which had been smashed into jagged slabs that now lay scattered in sharp angles. We came across several storage rooms packed from floor to ceiling with ammunition of all kinds. We found discarded regime and Iranian-linked militia flags strewn across the grounds, some of them obscured by dust and debris. Tellingly, we also discovered posters of the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan.

In all, Turkey cleared more than 5,000 square kilometres of Daesh and the YPG in three separate cross-border operations and killed or captured thousands of terrorists. The campaigns reinforced yet again just how complex and multi-faceted the Syrian war was, with so many parties involved both directly and indirectly, each with their unique sets of interests and agendas. Predictably, this led to accusations of biased reporting. However, the counter-argument would be that, justifiably or not, all public broadcasters will lean to some degree or other towards a particular narrative, including, many would argue, the BBC, which has in the past been held up by some as the standard-bearer of objective journalism.

There is also the compelling argument that for many years, wars were reported from a western perspective, often serving the political, economic, and military interests of certain governments. Al Jazeera changed that, starting with its reporting of the 2003 Gulf War; since then other channels, such as TRT World, have also made considerable strides in covering international news from new perspectives.

Putting aside the moral arguments surrounding the justification for war per se, in the case of Turkey, few can deny its concerns. Daesh is universally acknowledged as a terrorist organisation, and the PKK is listed as a terrorist group by the US and EU. It is difficult to see how any country would tolerate having such groups along its border, especially as Turkey fears its NATO allies have washed their hands of the matter. Washington has gone so far as to admit that Turkey has a right to protect itself, and the US-led anti-Daesh coalition even gave some degree of vocal support for Operation Euphrates Shield before changing its stance.

As reporters, we must be mindful of all of this as we go about our work. But our job is not to pass judgment. It is to keep giving voices to the millions of ordinary people caught up in a seemingly never-ending war that appears to be getting worse with each passing day.

Foreign Fighter

Sufean Mostafa Kamal tells me he is good at war. Until a few years ago, the bright young university student had never even received a parking ticket, let alone committed a crime. But one day in 2013, aged 19, he decided to leave his home city of London. He traveled across several

countries and crossed into the northern Syrian province of Idlib. He then walked into an ammunitions store, bought a gun, and went on a killing spree that lasted six years.

Kamal and I sit facing each other in a tiny room inside a high-security detention centre near the Turkish city of Izmir. He tells me he only targeted Syrian soldiers, and that he has no idea how many of them he killed. He says he was protecting the Syrian people against Bashar Al Assad's brutal regime, and that he feels no remorse for what he did. His dark, almond-shaped eyes look directly into mine as he insists he was never a member of Daesh or any Al Qaida affiliated group. He clearly wants me to believe him, but, more importantly, he wants to convince those in whose hands his fate now lies.

Kamal is among the 40,000 or so foreign fighters believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016, around 5,000 of them from Europe. Now, like so many others, Kamal wanted to return home. But that was not to be. He was stopped at Istanbul's Sabiha Gokcen airport in early 2018 as he tried to board a flight to London. His name had been passed on to the Turkish security services by British intelligence on the grounds that he was suspected of having links with a terrorist organisation. In a drastic step, the British government stripped Kamal of his citizenship. He had been held in detention ever since.

It had taken my colleague, Asli Atbas, many months of painstaking negotiations with the Turkish authorities before they agreed to allow Kamal to talk to us. Their reluctance was unsurprising and understandable. Turkey was – and at the time of publication still is – housing 79 foreign fighters in holding centres across the country, hailing from a myriad of countries including Egypt, Pakistan, Russia, France, and the

UK. Not only was the upkeep of these men costing the Turkish taxpayer, there was also concern about the potential security risks they posed. Many, like Kamal, had no intention of remaining in Turkey, but their countries had washed their hands of them, and Ankara was not about to take reckless risks in a delicate situation.

As a result, when permission was eventually granted, it was clearly a big scoop for TRT World. Still, my team and I approached the interview with more than a sense of trepidation. As I gazed out of the car window into the arid, late-summer countryside during the hour-long drive from Izmir to the detention centre, I wondered what lay in store. I had met many fighters in my time, but only in the field. The interviews I had conducted with them had been brief and in the presence of other people. I had never met a foreign fighter, let alone one whose citizenship had been revoked. Without a doubt, this interview was going to be very different from anything I had done before.

Now, as we sat across each other, Kamal exuded a contrary air of indignation and vulnerability. Dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt and sporting a neatly trimmed beard, he could have been one of the many inconspicuous young men I had walked past on the streets of London every day.

But of course, Kamal was anything but ordinary. He was, by his own admission, a killer. He told me he had faced little resistance as he crossed into Syria. "There wasn't any process in terms of foreign fighters coming into Syria," he revealed, "It was just chaos. As you know, the north fell into the hands of the rebels so there's no government there anymore. There was no law and order during that period, so anyone who wanted to join the Syrian revolution could just come in and join."

Kamal's story brought home to me the proxy nature of the Syrian war in a way no government announcement had managed to do. The presence of foreign mercenaries in war is nothing new, and it has been speculated that men such as Kamal, who say they were fighting alongside moderate rebels, had done so with the full knowledge and support of many Western countries. Matters had been complicated, however, by the presence of groups that had been designated as terrorist organisations. They included Daesh and Al Qaida-affiliated groups. Kamal maintained that he fought as an independent, but large parts of Idlib, where he said he was based, is controlled by HTS and groups aligned to it, and that is the reason the British government gave for its decision.

Kamal is visibly dismayed by the decision and wants to be given the opportunity to clear his name.

"I'm shocked to see the British government going down to that level where you're guilty without even standing trial in front of a judge," he says, leaning back in his chair resignedly, "even in the Arab world, where dictators are in power, you might go to prison and you might be tortured, but the reality is you actually stand in front of a judge. Whereas in Britain, fighters, they deem them as terrorists; aid workers, they deem them as terrorists; journalists, they deem them as terrorists."

According to international law, rendering a person stateless is illegal, but the British government has pointed to the fact that Kamal's mother was Moroccan-born and therefore he would be entitled to citizenship there. The fact that he had never stepped foot in the North African country had, it would seem, little bearing on the decision.

Unlike other British citizens who have undergone similar fates, such as Shamima Begum and Jack Letts, both of whom admitted they had joined Daesh, Kamal points out that there is no evidence to prove that he was anything other than a moderate fighter. But he says a lack of transparency is preventing him from clearing his name. "Even my entire file is secret," he laments, "I can't look at it. My lawyer can't have a look at it. What type of justice is that?"

Britain is not alone in its actions. Australia has stripped several of its nationals of their citizenship. The German and Danish parliaments have passed legislation do the same, and several other countries are planning to follow suit.

As the interview draws to a close, I am overcome by a sense of hopelessness. I am obviously not qualified to assess the legal implications of Kamal's actions, but I see a 24-year-old man whose life is over before it has even begun. In many ways, I see Kamal as the embodiment of the senselessness of this war. So many parties claiming the moral high ground; so much finger-pointing, and all the while the death and destruction continues.

My sadness is compounded by the fact that our interview has been interspersed with personable, casual conversation. It turns out that Kamal grew up less than a few kilometres away from me in West London. I had passed his school countless times. We compared notes on streets, restaurants, and local landmarks in a way that only those from the same neighbourhood are able to. We had even shopped at the same supermarket. I wonder how two people, whose backgrounds are in many ways comparable, could end up taking such different paths, and yet one day find themselves face to face in a place so far from home.

Kamal says he eventually became disillusioned with the lack of unity among the rebel fighters. That was when he decided to leave. He has been polite and respectful throughout the interview, and yet he remains defiant. "If the British government thinks I will ever apologise or I regret going to Syria they're mistaken," he says, "If there is one foreign fighter in the whole of the Syrian revolution that does not feel any regret whatsoever it's me."

With that, the interview is over, and Kamal is escorted out of the room. I watch him as he slowly walks away, his broad shoulders swaying in time with the rhythm of his footsteps. As he enters a room at the end of the corridor, I catch a momentary glimpse of some of the other men inside. Seconds later, the door slams shut behind him. It creates a sharp, metallic clang that bounces off the walls and vibrates through the air before fading away, leaving behind an eerie, hollow silence. Kamal has vanished. Not just from us, but from any life he ever knew, and there is no knowing if he will ever return.

Reflections

Putting aside for a moment its obvious risks, war is often the easiest of stories to tell. Often, it is simply a case of switching the camera on. The visuals will most likely be stronger than anything any reporting team will ever see anywhere else, and the human voices will be equally compelling. For the reporter, war stories tell themselves.

Nonetheless, the nuances and complexities of all wars need to be reflected in any report if it is to be a faithful representation of events. This

applies in particular to the Syrian war, which, in many respects, embodies how war reporting has evolved in the 21st century. Its uniqueness has posed a myriad of new challenges for journalists, many of which have been described above.

To reiterate, contemporary wars require contemporary reporting. In an era where individual media outlets are competing not just with each other, but also with the increasingly influential role of social media, it has become more important than ever to ensure that what we publish is accurate, balanced, well-sourced and, equally importantly, contextualized. It is not enough for us to simply state events as we see them. We need to present information within a historical, cultural, social and political framework, and that is something that will always remain a challenge.

In March 2020, the Syrian war passed the grim milestone of entering its ninth year. At the time, the country's north-eastern province of Idlib – the last remaining rebel stronghold – was being pounded by Russian airstrikes while regime fighters and their allies advanced on the ground. As many of the three million people trapped inside Idlib desperately moved towards the Turkish border, Turkey launched its fourth ground operation inside Syria.

But, just as a tentative ceasefire came into effect, a global event of such monumental proportions materialised that it not only achieved in Syria what nine years of diplomacy had failed to do, it stopped the entire world in its tracks. The scale of the covid-19 pandemic was something much of the world could never have predicted, and not only did it directly impact the fighting in Syria, it also brought many conflicts in other parts of the world to an abrupt halt. Although the coronavirus did not

completely stop the fighting inside Syria, it did slow it down considerably, and in the space of just a few weeks, a new challenge emerged: that of how to test, protect, and treat millions of internally displaced people and those living in refugee camps. This is a particularly mammoth task given that so many of these people cannot socially distance themselves due to cramped conditions and have limited access to adequate testing facilities and basic hygiene products.

For us journalists, our hands have been tied. Most of us have been working from home and have become solely reliant on information from agencies and aid workers – who themselves are receiving information second or third-hand. The result has been that the crucial reporting of the impact of the coronavirus inside war zones has been severely hampered.

At the time of writing, there is no way of predicting how long the pandemic will last or what kind of world will emerge from it. What is certain is that we can expect a global recession of a magnitude unlike anything the world has seen in many decades. As millions of businesses collapse, unemployment rates skyrocket, and governments across the world pledge billions, if not trillions, of dollars in desperate attempts to prevent their economies from crashing, questions arise about where ongoing conflicts will feature in this inevitable re-alignment of the world order.

Nevertheless, if history teaches us anything, it is that it repeats itself. The Syrian war is not formally over. Millions of people are still displaced. Entire cities have been destroyed or abandoned, and fighters belonging to all sides are waiting in the background. There is every chance that at some point the fighting may resume in some degree or another. When

that happens, we will be there, and we will once again start telling the stories of war. While there may be a respite right now, our job is not yet over.

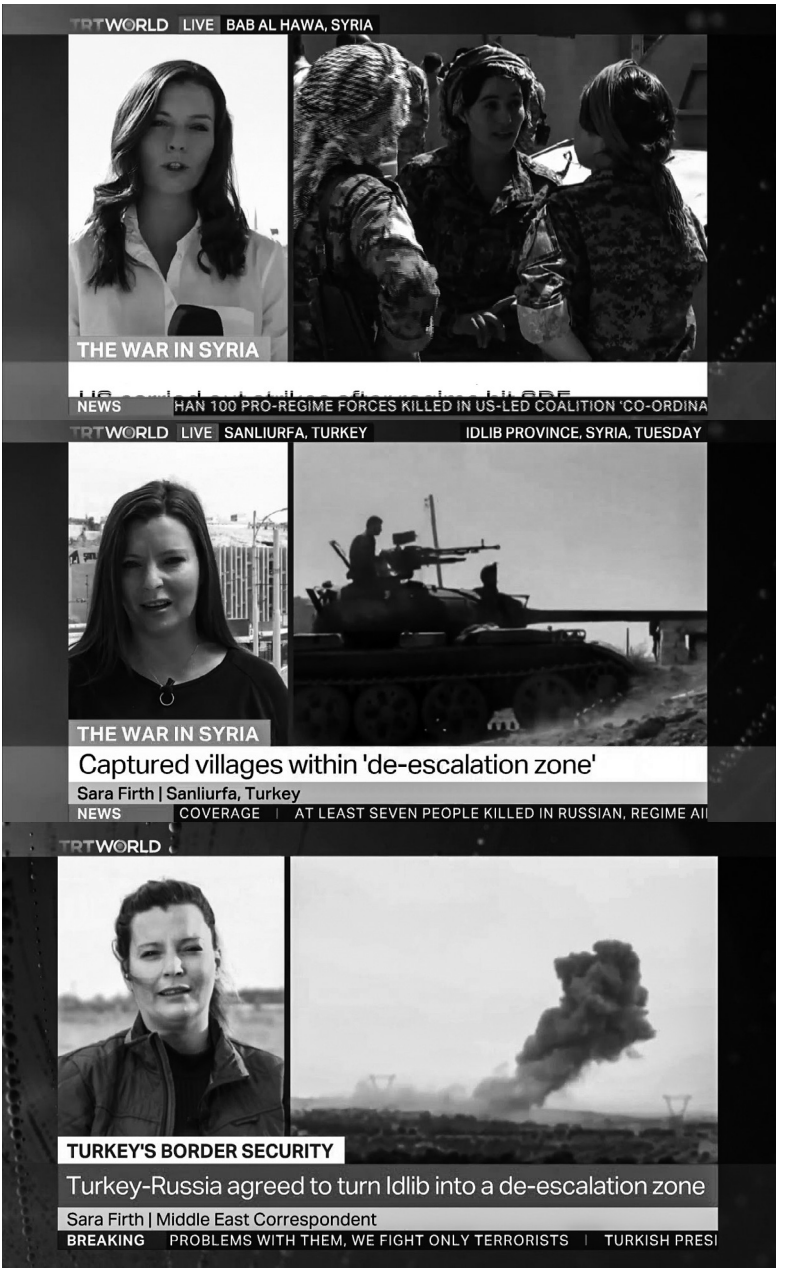
REPORTING SYRIA

SARA FIRTH

I never imagined as a young reporter on the ground for the first time inside Syria that, almost a decade on, I would still be reporting the same war. The conflict in Syria has come to define my career thus far and has impacted my reporting and my life personally in ways both big and small.

I will never forget the harrowing stories that have been recounted to me by Syrian survivors of the conflict. Interviews that have laid bare the extent of the Bashar al-Assad regime's brutality and provided incontrovertible evidence of war crimes committed by the Syrian regime and Russia and various armed groups on the ground.

I began my career reporting in Syria for a Russian state-funded channel called RT (then known as Russia Today), that was sympathetic in much of their coverage to the Assad regime.


TRTWORLD LIVE BAB AL HAWA, SYRIA
THE WAR IN SYRIA
NEWS HAN 100 PRO-REGIME FORCES KILLED IN US-LED COALITION 'CO-ORDINA
TRTWORLD LIVE SANLIURFA, TURKEY IDLIB PROVINCE, SYRIA, TUESDAY
THE WAR IN SYRIA
Captured villages within 'de-escalation zone'
Sara Firth | Sanliurfa, Turkey
NEWS COVERAGE | AT LEAST SEVEN PEOPLE KILLED IN RUSSIAN, REGIME AI
TRTWORLD
TURKEY'S BORDER SECURITY
Turkey-Russia agreed to turn Idlib into a de-escalation zone
Sara Firth | Middle East Correspondent
BREAKING PROBLEMS WITH THEM, WE FIGHT ONLY TERRORISTS | TURKISH PRESI

I have also reported freelance as the rise of Daesh seized the international spotlight, with attacks both coordinated and inspired by the terror group impacting countries worldwide.

I have spent the last three years reporting the Syrian conflict with Turkey's English language public broadcaster, TRT World, which has given extremely comprehensive coverage to the humanitarian impact of the war. As a whole, throughout the course of the war, Turkey has been sympathetic in their coverage to the opposition groups calling for the fall of the Assad regime.

In many ways, my reporting experience has given me a clear insight into how editorial lines, especially, but not exclusively, in state-run channels, can be impacted by their stance towards the conflict.

I have made many mistakes along the way, far too many to recount. However, reflecting back now, I feel I have gained an awareness into the pitfalls and bɑrriers of reporting that bias or perceived bias by the reporter can present. I hope by recounting some of the things I have learnt along the way about conflict reporting can be used to examine how we might avoid those barriers, overcome them, and strengthen our reporting. I have tried to be honest in my reporting at all times.

When it comes to the Syrian conflict, there are many ways I know I have fallen short. This is the case internationally, too; my personal feeling is journalism overall has let down the Syrian people. Divisiveness and propaganda have clouded the issue to such an extent that nearly a decade on, people not involved in news will still ask "So, what is really happening in Syria?"

Syrians, at great personal risk to their wellbeing, have shared their stories with the world only for the international community to remain in-

active, polarised, and unwilling to act in the face of grave atrocities to protect civilians on the ground. As journalists, then, whose job it is to tell the truth, explain what is happening, and provide enough evidence to contribute to the political will to bring about change, we have failed in Syria.

What is happening in Syria?

This is my own brief overview as a journalist who has spent the best part of a decade in and out of Syria.

I saw first-hand the beginning of the uprising when unarmed protestors were calling for the downfall of the Assad regime. In a country where the political climate meant it was dangerous even to critique the government in conversation, one can imagine the courage required to take to the street and risk getting sighted by the Mukhabarat (Syria's secret police), being henceforth known publicly as a critic of the Assad regime.

One of the incidents that sparked the uprising was when some young children, who had sprayed anti-regime graffiti in Daraa, were detained, tortured, and killed. Their deaths contributed significantly to the protests that ignited across the country.

When unarmed protestors began to be shot dead in the streets, it inevitably led to the uprising becoming an armed one. Armed elements, including regime army defectors and some civilians, began taking control of cities, towns, and even suburbs of Damascus. While even at the start it would have been factual to report that there were armed ele-

ments, there was a definite lack of clarity over exactly who these armed elements were and the differences between many of the factions that identified as "The Free Syrian Army".

I was asked after a bombing in Damascus in 2012 by my channel: "Why won't you call the people who carried out that attack terrorists?" My reasoning was clear. Many of the protestors I interviewed told us that the regime was carrying out those attacks to de-legitimise the opposition. The regime language right from the start described the opposition as "terrorists." It was easy for channels that were pro-regime to simply mirror that language.

Bombing a civilian-populated area is no doubt an act of terror. While I agreed with my channel that I would refer to the incidents themselves as terror attacks, I would also make transparent that it was unclear who was behind the attacks.

Assad's regime opened many prisons during these early years of protests. Hard-line Al Qaida prisoners were released in incidents that have been well documented.

Moreover, in a somewhat self-fulfilling prophecy, the regime's accusation that there were "terrorists" in the country looking to overthrow the regime was partly made true with the rise of groups like Daesh – one of the accusations against the regime being that they facilitated the rise of such groups.

Daesh's rise complicated the reporting of the uprising. It dominated the narrative around the world, and arguably still does with terror attacks either carried out or inspired by the group. Meanwhile, the pleas of Syrian civilians demanding the collapse of the regime, who were being

bombed, starved, and besieged, were often drowned out by the muddying and competing narratives. By this point, different channels had already established their respective agendas.

Internationally, despite Arab League monitors and UN observers being deployed in Syria to try and oversee ceasefires, with whom I was on the ground often following their travels closely, there was a clear lack of political will and support behind those missions to end the war. Russia and China wielded vetoes at the UN Security Council that prevented any kind of serious action being taken to protect civilians in Syria. The UK voted against military action, ostensibly spooked by repeating past mistakes of foreign interventions in countries like Libya, despite the fact that Syria was an entirely different conflict. The U.S., under then-President Barack Obama, issued a "red-line" warning in August 2012 against the use of chemical weapons but then failed to act when that red-line was crossed.

So, where are we nearly a decade on? In some media outlets, it almost sounds at times like the war in Syria is winding down. It is true that the regime has now taken back most of the country. Daesh has been, territorially at least, defeated. Additionally, Turkey's operation against the YPG in October 2019 in the north of the country has further complicated the situation. As has the United States' abrupt withdrawal and then apparent un-withdrawal, with President Donald Trump elucidating that U.S. troops are now in Syria "only for oil."

It is important to note that there are more than 5 million people officially registered by the UN as externally displaced. The majority of them have ended up in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. More than 6 million people are internally displaced in Syria, according to the UN. We do not know exactly how many Syrians have died; the UN stopped counting

at 400,000 dead. Thousands of people are thought to still be locked up inside Syria's notorious prisons.

For these millions of Syrians, the war is far from over.

Barriers to Reporting

Initially, as a reporter for a Russian channel, I was given considerable access and fresh insight to events in Syria. The favourable Russian coverage of Bashar al Assad and the Syrian regime meant that whilst many of the major international news agencies were being denied access, I was granted weeks-long visas, which were extended easily.

In 2012, Damascus was on high alert, with security forces everywhere. Protests were happening in the suburbs, but further afield we heard reports of civil war.

The way to get access to some of the more distant opposition areas was to wait outside the UN compound in the city centre early morning, and then follow the UN observers – that were then on the ground – as they went about their fact-finding mission. On one of these trips, the UN cars, that were being trailed by six or seven cars of media, stopped in Hama.

We discovered there that the next stop for the UN would be the Northwest Syrian province of Idlib, an area that had seen fierce resistance to the regime. It was also an area almost impossible to access without the UN's presence because of the danger presented by some of the groups operating in Idlib.

We had a very quick decision to make, and only a handful of journalists decided to make the journey following the UN.

When we got to Idlib, we discovered that Syrian regime forces still had control of the city centre at that time, but only just. Staying in an empty hotel with Syrian soldiers that night, we ate and went to sleep to the sound of gunfire.

The next morning, we followed the UN into the opposition-controlled suburbs of Idlib. As we were interviewing the crowds, they discovered that there were Russian media among the journalists.

We had to stop the interviews, get back into the cars, and leave the area fast. It was the first time I would be confronted with the real and dangerous reality of trying to report objectively and get all sides of the story; it is difficult when people on one side of the story consider you the enemy. At the end of that day, while I had the exclusive "Syria at Civil War" story, I had risked the lives of my team members, to get it.

Six years later I would find myself in a very similar position, only this time reporting for TRT World, which has given extensive coverage of the uprising and has been heavily critical of the Syrian regime and its response.

The changing face of the Syrian revolution

In 2012, reporting for RT, we drove into a suburb of Damascus to cover the funeral of some people who had been killed by the regime. Masked, armed men met the journalist's cars and escorted us to where the

crowds were chanting anti-regime slogans.

The mood was electric. People were lifting us on their shoulders to get better shots of the crowd and people wanted to speak. Many interviewees covered their faces when they spoke to the camera so as to not endanger their lives or those of their families – in case the regime saw them speaking out.

It is difficult to recount in words the bravery of the people we saw there. They knew far better than the journalists gathered about the regime's capacity for punishment, but who still took to the streets. Halfway through filming the funeral, something spooked the crowd and people thought a regime attack was taking place.

Everyone bolted, while a young boy grabbed my hand and ran with me down a side street. He stayed with me as I found my way back to the team and our car. The journalists who were covering the story were all making an exit and our cars drove out of the area to the roars of people continuing to chant anti-regime slogans. Each time on the ground in Syria, the hard reality of the situation was increasingly clear. While we were able to walk away from those dangerous situations, the people we were reporting on were not.

My report was ultimately a two-and-a-half-minute piece about what those in opposition-held areas were telling us. However, the story strap that ran under the piece on RT originally said something along the lines of "extremists take over Syrian suburb." After frantic phone-calls explaining not just why that was factually inaccurate and misportrayed the story, but also the potential risks that we faced and our potential limited access to opposition areas in the future, the strap was changed to read something like "protests in a Damascus suburb".

The mistrust of certain sides in consenting to media outlets that are deemed hostile to the cause is an issue for on the ground reporting. But, that should not mean that access should prevent critical reporting. The point in this situation was that the framing of the story was not faithful to the events as they occurred. This was an example of the many ways the media feeds into the disinformation that gets spread and which fuels dangerous divisions in the rhetoric about war, and they all have serious implications for those operating on the ground. This clearly shows the importance of trusting the outlet that you work for and that when submitted the story will be run truthfully to the events on the ground and not be misportrayed. In that one instance at least we were able to change the framing and run the story more accurately.

Reporting Idlib

Idlib has been the focus of a devastating bombing campaign carried out by the Syrian regime and backed by Russia. It is one of the last major rebel-held strongholds in Syria, but the challenges of reporting from the ground are not limited to the danger from the sky. Of the estimated 3 million civilians living in Idlib, it is thought there are around 10,000 people that belong to hard-line rebel groups. The group in charge of most of the Idlib province, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, has allowed some access to journalists, but the province remains one of the most dangerous and challenging in which to work.

A major risk in Idlib is the multitude of disparate hard-line groups that operate in different parts of the province. Knowing who is in control of what areas presents a major planning hurdle for any reporting trip on the ground. As we would come to learn in late 2018, even with the utmost care and organisation, it is dangerously easy to get caught out.

Kidnapped

While driving down a route we had taken just a few days previously inside Syria's Idlib, we came across a makeshift checkpoint. A large rock with a flag hung off it, and a couple of armed men stopped our car. We exited the car, and at first, the usual conversation ensued explaining who we were and why we were in Idlib.

Then, the mood changed. We were ordered to get into our car, but with all of us in the back seat and the two armed men driving. They told us they were taking us to another area, to meet some of the people we had said we were there to interview. But they did not.

As we drove further away, the men in the front told us to pull our clothes over our heads to cover our eyes, and to put our heads between our legs. Being in that situation, it is hard to explain the disbelief at what was unfolding. I kept saying "no" and tried to show my press card to them, repeating over and over that "we are journalists."

One of my team told me to be quiet. "Sara, we're being kidnapped," he told me plainly. I would not have made it through the next 28 hours without the calm and collected approach of my team to the situation we had found ourselves in.

When the car pulled up, we were allowed out by what looked like a large industrial hangar. We were all blindfolded and pushed down some stairs. When I took my blindfold off, I found myself in a cell with five other women and children. The cell was humid and damp, and through a vent in the wall we could hear the sounds of men screaming.

I huddled on the floor, completely in shock for about half an hour. Some of the little children came and sat next to me. After a while, I got up and started trying to communicate with the women in the cell. One of the

women spoke some English and told me she had been in the cell with her child for 49 days. They were making marks on the door of the cell to keep track of how long they had been held there.

She told me her husband had travelled to Syria to fight with Daesh but had been killed. She had remarried and had tried to escape with her second husband and their child but had been caught and put in this prison. She had not seen her husband since.

After a few hours, the screams started again. They were male but high-pitched like an animal's cry. I tried to listen hard to see if I could hear if it might be someone from my team, but the sound was sickening. I started banging on the metal door, desperate to know what was happening to my teammates. The woman taught me the Arabic word for "team," and when some masked men opened the hatch on the cell door, I kept repeating the word to them.

Eventually, they brought my Arabic speaking teammate outside my cell door, still blindfolded. The relief at seeing him unhurt was overpowering. He translated to the men for me that since we were journalists and one team, I would not feel calm until we were all held together.

Remarkably, after another hour, they opened the door and took me out. I pulled down my blindfold as they led me into a central area. I saw my two teammates still blindfolded and a man whose back had been severely whipped standing against the wall.

There were around eight men in this central area, and they all yelled at the guard when they saw my blindfold wasn't on. We were all put into an office-like room, with black leather sofas and a desk. It was the first time in about five hours I could breathe properly. The situation was still terrifying, but at least we were all back together.

That night was one of the most surreal nights of my life. We all alternated between talking and total silence. We told each other stories from our lives; confessions almost. It kept me calm and sane and focused. Those humid, chilling hours will stay with me for the rest of my life.

At one point I asked to use the bathroom and, whilst there, with a guard waiting outside the door, I stole a pair of nail clippers that had been left by the sink and hid it under my abaya. I had no idea what on earth I would do with them, but at that moment, I also had no idea what might come next.

By morning, with the team based in Istanbul having realised within an hour or so of our kidnapping something was wrong, we had been tracked down. The organisation and structure we had set up to provide us security with on the ground meant that people outside of Syria rapidly discovered something was wrong. Without that protection, the situation could have played out very differently.

The group that held us agreed to let us go. A senior member of the group entered the room after I had been told to cover my face and my entire body whilst he was addressing us. I sat, shaking with rage, covered, and listening to the exchange around me. After an hour, we were led up the stairs of the prison, into daylight, and driven in our car to the border.

The ordeal was finally over.

Reporting on the plight of the civilians in Idlib, remains the most challenging issue in my career currently. Describing the ordeal of those living under constant threat whilst having to find a way to report on the extremist elements without losing access completely nor playing into the narrative from countries like Russia and even more mainstream Western outlets that Idlib is an 'extremist hotbed'.

Access and barriers to reporting

There are many uncomfortable realities that I have faced as a reporter. These include:

1. Who you work for is often going to impact the type of access you have.

2. The access you have will often impact your perspective on the story you are telling.

3. There are ways that you mitigate this – mainly by being aware of these limitations that are placed on your reporting and finding ways to overcome them.

From my experience, whatever outlet you work for, when it comes to reporting from conflict zones, there will almost always be these types of barriers to reporting and access.

The deeds I have recounted are from two networks on largely opposing sides vis-à-vis their perspective of, and access to, the Syrian conflict. Likewise, these issues of barriers and access when reporting are applicable to many conflicts where your employer, or even your nationality, dictates who in the conflict views you as friend or foe and at times the bias you might knowingly or unknowingly hold before you even get on the ground reporting.

The effort to seek neutrality in reporting given the limitations becomes even more important in these situations, and it can often be challenging to achieve for many of the reasons I have laid out.

The point of recounting these stories is also to explain the very real risks that come even when you are granted access. Those barriers to

reporting mean in areas like Idlib, there is a void of information. With journalists struggling to reach these areas, it is rare to see and verify what is taking place on the ground. Even with access, the risks of being a journalist in some of these areas often means you are viewed as the enemy and will be treated as such if you cross the wrong path.

Staying with the story

The one truth I know about Syria, incontrovertibly, is this: that the international community has let down the Syrian people. All of us hold responsibility. This includes the international failure to take action and the woefully inadequate and often persecutory approach towards Syrian refugees.

There is a famous saying that the first casualty of war is the truth. I think that is inaccurate. What I learned was that it is the civilians who pay the price of war. With Syria, the first causality of the uprising were people who went out on the streets calling for freedom. Not the military commanders trained for such eventualities, nor the media getting on the ground to follow the story. Just ordinary people with stories that we mostly will never even hear about.

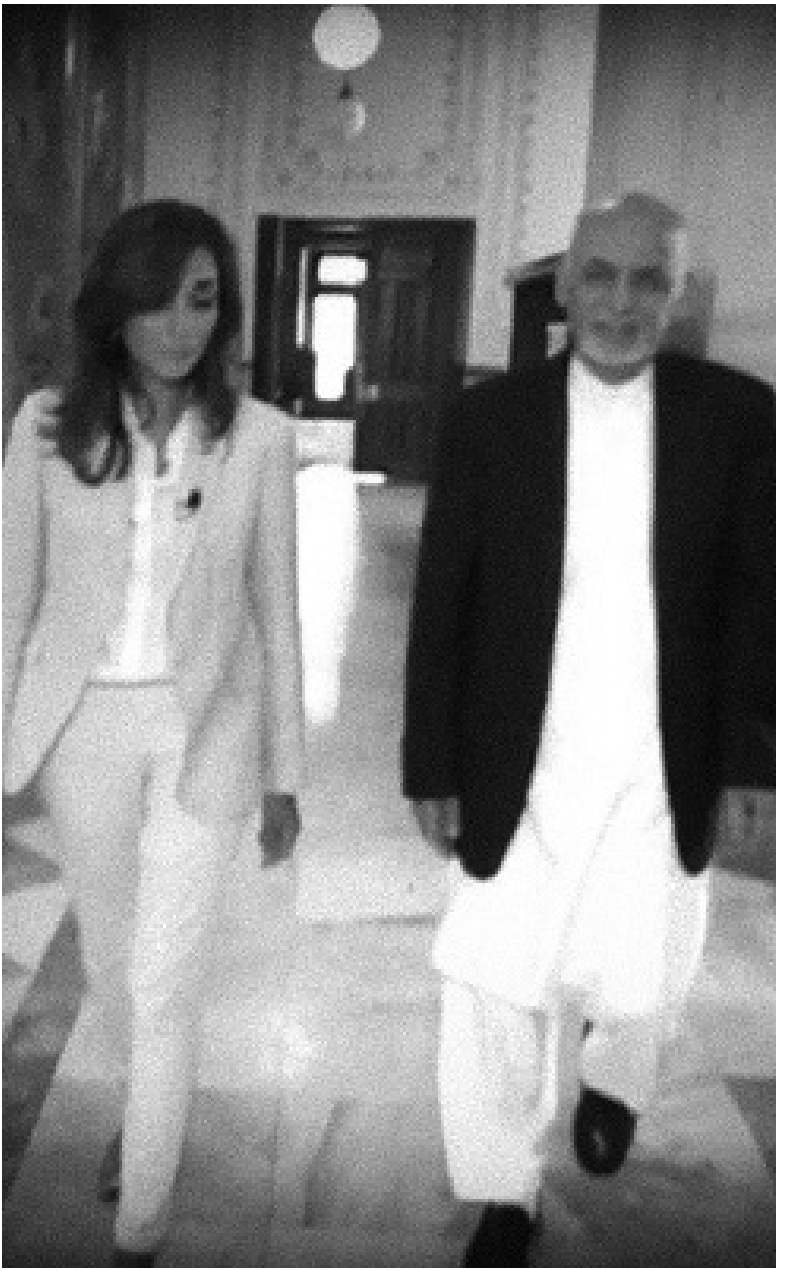
Due to the so-called fog of war and the barriers to reporting, some of which I have laid out in this piece, Syria keeps falling further and further down the news agenda. Perhaps that is the final point; as journalists, trying to get to the truth, we have a responsibility to stay with the story wherever that takes us and however long it needs us for, even when that war is in its tenth year with no real sign of abating.

COVERING WARS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

REPORTING AFGHANISTAN

TANYA GOUDSOUZIAN

War reporting is never easy, and it has been particularly difficult in Afghanistan. An 18-year war where the battlefield zone is often inaccessible and always dangerous. A history that far precedes 9/11 and carries on to the present day. A political situation that has stymied the international community for decades. A government that has gone from monarchy to secular republic, to Soviet proxy, to theocracy, and now to today's Islamic republic in less than five decades. An 'enemy' that have been described at different times as religious zealots, terrorists, and partners for peace. A press environment challenged by official narratives, numerous international agendas, and competition armed with social media and iPhone cameras. Few reporters have found modern war reporting easy, but the war in Afghanistan may be amongst the most difficult.



For me, it began serendipitously as do most life-changing events. A chance encounter at an internet café in a Dubai shopping mall in early 2001 set the course for my personal and professional interest in Afghanistan that has now spanned nearly two decades. A middle-aged man garbed in a white shalwar kameez and a black waistcoat approached me, introduced himself as the owner of the café, and said I reminded him of a girl he had known in his village many years ago. Then, he invited me for a cup of tea.

"The tea here is nearly as good as the tea we had back in my country," he said, wistfully.

So, the first thing I learned about this peculiar character was that he hailed from Afghanistan.

"Isn't that where Osama bin Laden is hiding?" I asked.

"Bah!" he said, dismissing the Al Qaida leader with a wave of his hand. "He's blown out of proportion. He takes credit for things he hasn't done..."

How would this man know, I wondered? Well, time to change the subject.

"So, wasn't there a war in Afghanistan?" I asked, in a bid to make conversation.

"I was injured 17 times in battle," he declared, proudly.

Surely, he was bragging. He looked a little too polished to me. With a potbelly, neatly trimmed beard and fancy watch, he was not exactly one's idea of a freedom fighter.

"You don't believe me?" he asked. "Good. You shouldn't believe what everybody tells you. But it so happens I am telling the truth. I have been injured 17 times in battle, and I lost my foot on a landmine. Would you like me to prove it?"

Before I could answer, he had raised the hem of his baggy *shalwar* to showcase a skin-colour prosthesis. I winced. He was satisfied.

So began a curious friendship between a forty-something *mujahideen* commander from Afghanistan and a twenty-something rookie journalist from Canada. Was he Taliban? No, although many Taliban had been *mujahideen* fighting the Soviets. But over the course of the next few months, we made it a habit to meet for tea and dessert and discuss anything from folktales to our respective dreams for the future.

At the time, I knew very little about Afghanistan and the war against the Soviets. Nor did most of my media colleagues. To us, the Taliban were nothing more than primitive and brutal tribesmen locked in the 15th century ruling over a mountainous country somewhere in Central Asia. They were what emerged victorious after the Soviet Union was driven out, and the civil war had ended. We believed the land was as dismal as the occasional media report portrayed it: burqa-clad women and religious zealots living in abject poverty. When they blew up the centuries' old Buddhas in Bamiyan, I was concerned, like many, for the loss of archaeological treasures. But in my mind, the Taliban's iron-fisted rule was a distant and irrelevant reality that didn't affect my life or the lives of anyone in the West. Reports about Afghanistan rarely featured in mainstream media as it seems the world lost interest in the country after the Cold War.

Had it ever been any different in Afghanistan?

The commander smiled and talked of wedding festivities, which would go on for days and days. He talked of dancing and music – both banned under Taliban rule. And, with a mischievous grin, he recalled the pranks he played on his cousins while growing up in his village.

His devotion to his country was endearing – even more so when I discovered his family had been brutally murdered by rival forces.

One evening, over strawberry tarts and green tea at the Burj Al Arab, he mentioned he was travelling to Rome to meet the former king of Afghanistan.

"There is a king of Afghanistan?" I asked.

"Yes, there is a king, and if people like you don't know he exists, it's probably his own fault," he said.

It was during this meeting that he revealed his involvement in what seemed to me at the time to be a hare-brained scheme to vanquish the ruling Taliban and restore the Afghan monarchy.

"It's the only chance to save my country," he sighed. "I fought the Soviets, only to live to see my country sink deeper into ruin. I've left the job unfinished."

"Can I interview you?" I asked, impulsively. It was a slow news period and it suddenly occurred to me that the commander might make for a nostalgic weekend feature about a war fought and lost.

"What would you want to interview me for?" he replied. "Interview the king!"

Within a month, I was boarding a plane to Rome to interview Mohamed Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan. There, from his quaint villa in a Roman suburb, surrounded by shrubs, the exiled king was calling for a Loya Jirga, the traditional Afghan grand national assembly, in the belief that peace could only come through dialogue.

Upon my return, however, I found my interview very hard to sell. Few people, whether editors or politicians, thought an exiled elderly king mattered in the grand scheme of things.

Two days before 9/11, I was having tea and peach melba with the commander at a French café when he received a call on his mobile. Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who led the resistance against the Taliban, had been assassinated by two Al Qaida suicide bombers posing as journalists. Nicknamed the Lion of Panjshir,[1] Shah Massoud had been the last hope for millions of Afghans in exile to free the country from the grip of the Taliban. In recent months, however, the resistance had been driven into a corner and humanitarian conditions were deteriorating.

I could tell the commander's mood was changed, but he tried to keep up a lively conversation until I finished my dessert. He entertained me with the story of a dubious houseguest who overstayed his welcome at the commander's home in Dubai. Bound by the tribal customs of his forefathers, the commander was forced to accommodate this guest so long as he chose to stay. It recalled the predicament of the Taliban, who would not – could not – hand over Osama bin Laden, who was for all intents and purposes a guest in Afghanistan and a guest was guaranteed safety by the host. He drove me home that evening. It was the last time I would see him.

[1] https://www.rferl.org/a/ahmad_shah_masud_afghanistan_assassination_taliban_al-qaeda/24323076.html

Two days later, aeroplanes hit the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. An international guessing game ensued over the culpability of this act of terror. My newspaper asked me to write an article about the theories surrounding the incident; this would be the first of dozens written over the years. In preparation, I called the commander to see what he thought about the whole affair. A number of suspects had been variously cited, ranging from South American drug-lords to the Palestinians. A few analysts had begun to consider the Afghan connection. Was there really a connection between 9/11 and the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud?

"Yes, there is a connection," said the commander, without hesitation. "But this was definitely not perpetrated by Afghans. Afghans fight to the death, but they love to live. We would never commit suicide attacks."

"What, then, is the link between Afghanistan and 9/11?" I persisted.

"Perhaps," he said, "the forces who carried out the 9/11 attack foresaw US retaliation. And this could have been an attempt to reduce the capability of [Massoud's] Northern Alliance, since they would be the only tool that the US could use to intervene within Afghanistan."

"Why would the US use the Northern Alliance? Couldn't they just go at it themselves? They've got the strongest military in the world!" I said.

"No," he replied. "The only way to hit Afghanistan is from the inside and through the opposition. It's next to impossible to attack Afghanistan from the outside. There are no landmarks, no airports, no significant targets. What would the missiles hit?"

Following this phone conversation, the commander left town. For about a month, I did not hear from him. During this time, the certainty of Al Qaida's involvement had been established, and the US had declared its

resolve to take action against the Taliban which had given refuge to Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan and were now refusing to hand him over to the Americans. Overnight, the Taliban's image dramatically changed in the global perception from backward zealots whose existence was largely irrelevant to the West, to accomplices to the world's most insidious terror group. As for my friend, I would later learn the commander had been killed in an ambush by Taliban fighters a few miles from the village where he was born – the same village of which he had often spoken.

Weeks after the death of my friend, I came across a book that he had given me. "Read it, and you will understand my country," he had said. "But it's my only copy and I want it back."

It was then that much of the commander's political ramblings started to make sense to me. My fascination with the country, this most recent war, and reporting on both grew immensely.

Reporting, post 9/11

Before 9/11, most people in the West knew nothing of the Taliban or Afghanistan. But after 9/11, the official narrative was no longer Taliban, the Zealots. It was Taliban, the Terrorists. And the media reported that narrative – hook, line, and sinker.

The story was shaped by official pronouncements, echoed by the legions of reporters descending onto Kabul airport, that the Taliban were terrorists who provided sanctuary and safe haven for Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida. They reported Taliban social norms and intolerance, including public executions in sports stadiums, women shrouded in head-to-toe burqas, and deliberate destruction of archaeological treasures. Moreover, they reported that a thief would have his hands and feet chopped

off, men without long beards would be severely beaten, women accused of adultery would be stoned to death, music and television were banned, and young boys were prohibited from playing soccer and flying kites. No young girls as they were already imprisoned behind family walls.

Meanwhile, the US-led war on Afghanistan began with the aerial bombardment of Taliban and Al Qaida related camps, and with US troops on the ground pushing the Taliban from provinces they controlled. By December, the Taliban had lost Kandahar, their last stronghold.

The Northern Alliance took over the capital, Kabul. Germany hosted a conference to organise a post-Taliban government; on the sidelines, experts were meeting to discuss the rebuilding of Afghan civil society. Japan was hosting a conference to collect international contributions for the reconstruction of the war-torn country. These conferences, like the battlefield, were closely reported.

It was not long after these developments that many journalists, I included, travelled to Afghanistan for the first time to report on another aspect of the conflict – the process of rebuilding the state and the war-weary Afghan nation. I wanted to see with my own eyes the country for which my friend had died. I wanted to report on the country, and I wanted to understand, first-hand, this group called the Taliban.

The months immediately following the installation of the Hamid Karzai-led Afghan Interim Administration were filled with euphoria and hope. Karzai, with his distinctive multi-hued tribal chapan and qaraqul hat, was hailed by fashionistas as "The chicest man on the planet today." [2] One London paper dubbed him "The most unlikely style icon since ... Mahatma Gandhi."[3]

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[2] https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/tom-ford-described-hamid-karzai-as-the-chicest-man-on-the-planet
[3] https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2002-01-31-0201310025-story.html

In 2003, the bestselling novel "The Kite Runner" told the story of a young Afghan-American man who makes peace with the ghosts of his past, including a younger half-brother – whose mother was an ethnic-Hazara servant in their home – left behind when the family moved to the US. The painfully vivid description of his half-brother being raped by a gang of boys (who would later become Taliban) sealed the Taliban's image in the consciousness of most Westerners, not only as Terrorists but as brutal paedophiles.

Early reporting was mixed, and much of the story was told through the power of pictures, with none more poignant than the iconic National Geographic cover girl. The orphan with the red headscarf and piercing sea-green eyes, who, in June 1985, became the poster child for Afghan refugees pouring into Pakistan. In Afghanistan, she came to be known as the "Afghan Mona Lisa". Although, when the iconic photograph was taken, Sharbat Gula was fleeing the Soviet Occupation; the Taliban had not yet come to be.

In 2002, this girl was found in a village near Tora Bora. Now a 45-year-old widow and a mother of four, Sharbat Gula's face told the story of a difficult life and the hardships of war. The West was aghast at the transformation and patted itself on the back as surely this was the validation they needed for having waged war to rid Afghanistan of the heinous Taliban.

And then there were the images of the Taliban. Bedraggled, scraggly-bearded, and scowling men holding outdated Kalashnikovs and riding in the backs of pick-up trucks. All these images juxtaposed starkly with images of disciplined and sharply outfitted American and NATO soldiers, the freshly scrubbed up Afghan mujahideen-turned-politicians, and their articulate and telegenic spokesmen. The visual messaging was strong. Captions were hardly needed.

Reporting from international conferences from the relative safety and comfort of Bonn, Tokyo, Berlin, and London put the spotlight on another side of Afghanistan, with men in suits deliberating the future of Afghanistan, the shape of its government, and the cost of reconstruction. It was perhaps reminiscent of post-World War I conferences in Cairo, Paris, Sevres, or San Remo, where a new order for the Middle East was being drawn up with little concern for realities on the ground. Media coverage did not address this disconnect, emphasising the more social issues of governance, security assistance, reform, and the political process for peace and reconciliation instead. Few articles scrutinising the people, the processes, or the incipient corruption emerged until much later.

Reporting Over The Last Five Years

Since those early days, the war, the Taliban, and the coverage have gone through a transformation. In 2001, the story was 9/11 and the US intervention. In 2004, the Berlin Conference. In 2009, Obama's "Surge". In 2012, the Chicago Conference. And today, it is the elusive search for peace with a "transformed" Taliban. No longer Terrorists, but Partners. As goes the official narrative, they are "trusted interlocutors for peace" seeking a deal so the Americans can withdraw their troops from a war that US President Donald Trump calls "endless" and "ridiculous".

Today, journalists for respected international news outlets go "behind Taliban lines" [4] to obtain reports that normalise the Taliban and show them in a more sympathetic light than ever before. They report on women working in clinics; children that, at least for now, go to school; midwives who, with faces uncovered, speak to a camera operated by a

[4] https://www.amazon.com/Frontline-Behind-Taliban-Lines/dp/B003CP1SSI

man; all things unheard of during the earlier Taliban rule. Other Western journalists enter villages once targets of Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) raids, exposing what they say are unjust and heavy-handed practices by CIA-backed paramilitary forces. Such reports are certainly a reversal from the early days when the media and the public might have turned a blind eye to methods used in the hunt for radicals and terrorists.

What accounts for this change? Factors certainly include 18 years of slow political progress, an 18-year war with little tangible progress, 18 years of international assistance with little to show, waning public support at home, and a patient Taliban indifferent to these same factors.

The shifting nature of ground operations has also changed the war reporting. The US and Coalition forces have reduced force levels considerably since the 2009 "Surge". Rather than large US-led military operations with hundreds of US forces in the lead, there are small teams of special forces embedded in large Afghan formations. Touted as "self-sufficiency" and "Afghan-led operations", the lighter Coalition presence in these operations (except for air support) has made war reporting far more difficult, and far more dangerous. No longer are press routinely embedded into US units, escorted and protected, and facilitated with life support and air transportation. And the battlefield fighting is less one-sided as Afghan units are by some accounts [5] routinely bested by the Taliban, at least until the American warplanes and drones show up. This has resulted in significantly greater danger to reporters (and significantly greater liability to their employers).

Along with the shift from Coalition-led to Afghan-led ground operations, the US (particularly under the Obama Administration) has moved

[5] https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-afghan-forces-losing-ground-to-taliban/a-36177545

to a far greater reliance upon armed drones. The US and the British have conducted targeted killings against Taliban leaders, either through special forces or drones, and the results have been mixed as collateral damage has often offset the successes. For its part, the Taliban has also used targeted killings. In 2011 alone, they killed a former Afghan president, the police chief in northern Afghanistan, the commander of the elite anti-Taliban force, and the police chief of Kunduz.

Yet, reporting on the drone operations has been difficult. The operations are classified, sequestered behind security barriers, and often conducted from container vans in the middle of the Nevada desert [6]. The detached and antiseptic nature of these operations are hard to report, photograph, and explain, except to perhaps a young generation brought up on video games. The operations have none of the humanity, none of the context, and indeed none of the images critical to good journalism.

The Taliban, too, have taken the story off the battlefield and into the realm of public relations. Today, along with proving themselves shrewd negotiators, the Taliban are challenging the negative press over the years by selling a public image of a more modern, less conservative movement ready to take over governance of Afghanistan. Often touted as "Taliban 2.0", its emissaries have refined their public image and their public relations.

Western media have been partners, wittingly or unwittingly, to the Taliban "image offensive"[7], reporting on young Taliban fighters playing cricket, hugging government security forces during religious festivals, and raising normal families. Urbane Afghan politicians meet with the

[6] https://www.foxnews.com/us/drone-pilots-fight-foreign-wars-from-remote-nevada-desert
[7] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/08/22/yes-taliban-has-changed-its-gotten-much-better-pr/

Taliban and return astonished, some awed, at the sophistication of the negotiators. Afghan women who joined discussions in Doha [8] expressed amazement that the Taliban sat across from them and engaged in direct dialogue, unthinkable in the recent past. They talked of receiving "Swag Bags" of Arabian perfume reflecting traditional Afghan warmth and hospitality. Off the record discussions with analysts at various think tanks have suggested that the Taliban's recent denials of involvement in attacks, too, is a rebranding strategy, especially those attacks that target women and children.

The Taliban also leverage social media; the objective is to manipulate the perceptions of both an Afghan audience and a wearied West. Its "Media and Culture Commission" employs Facebook and Twitter to broadcast messages in multiple languages. It uses "handles" and "sites" to issue communiques and disinformation on WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram. It reportedly also uses Twitter trolls to reinforce its narrative. They skilfully spin narratives, usually in a tone of a wise elder speaking to wayward youth, by depicting themselves as patriots, the Western military as occupiers, and the Afghan National Security Forces as "hirelings". For example, on the centenary of Afghan independence on 19 August, they joined in the national celebrations by issuing a statement to the "Afghan Mujahid nation" about the "blessings of the Jihadi endeavors", despite the centenary celebration honouring the emergence of a secular, constitutional monarchy.

Today, many western advocates for dialogue with the Taliban insist that an injustice was done to the latter by labelling them terrorists. This is on the basis that they had never posed a threat to America, merely waging an insurgency against the Afghan government that they considered a puppet regime, or against coalition troops, which they considered an

[8] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/opinion/afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks.html

occupying force. They also highlight that the Taliban was never listed as a terror group by the US State Department. As the prospect of a US-Taliban peace deal draws nearer, attempts appear to be underway to tarnish the image of the Afghan government with reports of alleged sexual harassment, fascism, and electoral fraud.

The dynamics on the ground are complex. As a journalist, I regularly ask myself to what degree the media have been complicit in framing the discourse, or allowing foreign agendas to, in a manner that does injustice to those dynamics. More important than what has been said is why the media has said it. Why is war reporting so hard in Afghanistan? Why has the media been relatively soft, where it is typically tough? In Iraq, for instance, reporting has been hard-hitting, breaking stories on Abu Ghraib, war crimes, torture, corruption, and a host of other news one would expect from journalists.

What's different in Afghanistan?

Part of the challenge is that most journalists covering Afghanistan are naturally not long-time scholars of the region. It was their job to parachute into the war and "objectively" report on what was the biggest story of the decade. Not since Vietnam in 1965 had the Americans deployed troops overseas at such a large scale to defeat a regime it considered a threat to world security.

For those young journalists, along with many of their readers, modern Afghan history essentially began in 2001. Unlike the rare, hoary journalists who covered the Soviet occupation and its later defeat, they had very little knowledge or understanding of the events that led to the rise of the Taliban. Belying the Taliban's brutal five-year rule (1996-2001)

was the unpopular reality that the Taliban had once been received as heroes by many Afghans, ending the civil war which erupted following the Soviet defeat. Early Coalition-fed reporting had none of that context, nor did it question official reports or challenge the narratives delivered by national and international institutions.

Further obstructing Afghan war reporting was, and is, the new and unprecedented dangers on the battlefield. At one time, a vest with "PRESS" emblazoned on the back provided a measure of security; today, however, journalists are high-value targets for the media attention their abduction or death would generate, or the stories they could reveal. According to the media freedom group Reporters Without Borders, Afghanistan is the deadliest country in the world for journalists, with at least 80 journalists and media workers killed working in the country since 2001. Few terrorists have any second thoughts about shooting the messenger, especially as social media has allowed insurgent and terror groups, whether Taliban or Daesh, to craft and disseminate their own messaging.

One of the most significant moments for war reporters in the post-9/11 era was when Wall Street Journal bureau chief, Daniel Pearl, was beheaded by his Al Qaida captors in Karachi in February 2002. The murder, recorded on camera and uploaded on YouTube, served as a stark reminder to reporters and bureau chiefs alike of the threats faced by those daring to take risks in pursuit of a story. Prior to Pearl's murder was the mysterious death of Carlos Mavroleon[9] in a rundown hotel in Peshawar in 1998. Mavroleon was a Greek shipping heir turned war reporter for major US news outlets like CBS' Sixty Minutes, and affectionately dubbed "shithole specialist" by his friends and colleagues. Following the attacks on the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya,

[9] https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2000/aug/20/features.magazine47

believed to have been masterminded by Osama Bin Laden, American investigators had followed the trail of the bombers from East Africa to Pakistan and on – via Peshawar – into eastern Afghanistan. Mavroleon was passing through Peshawar on his way to report from terrorist training camps in eastern Afghanistan, at a time when bin Laden was said to offer a bounty of $15,000 for dead Westerners, when he was killed. Both Pearl and Mavroleon were deliberately targeted, and their deaths were game-changers for the industry, especially for Western journalists in South East Asia.

In the years following these and other incidents, media outlets have been reluctant to greenlight any story that might result in injury or death of a staff member. To put it bluntly, the cost of insurance or reparations in the event of a mishap is not considered cost-effective. Of course, this has greatly hindered the ability of journalists to report, verify stories, and meet with alternative sources outside of conventional locales.

Another signature feature of the Afghan landscape is "the kid with the smartphone", or "amateur mobile journalism". With many war reporters choosing or directed to avoid unnecessary risks, alternative forms of journalism have emerged which further complicate the landscape. Anyone with a smartphone, whether a kid, a taxi driver, or an insurgent, is now a reporter. They can bypass accredited journalists (and accredited journalism) and instantly disseminate 'news' or videos through social media. Some see this as a positive development, describing it as local communities taking ownership of their narrative. Critics point out the dangers of unverified information competing with traditional forms of news gathering and information dissemination as they post on the same platforms used by legitimate news sources, think tanks, and governments. Lines are blurred between established journalistic practices and unfiltered information lacking scrutiny.

As a result, the bona fide war reporter today competes with other sources of information, sometimes as simple as a kid with a smartphone. At times the impact has been positive. A case in point was the gruesome death of a 27-year-old mentally disabled Afghan woman, Farkhunda Malikzada. Falsely accused of having burned the Holy Quran, she was beaten to death by a mob of angry men in Kabul in March 2015. It was an event that might have been forgotten if it were not for an eyewitness who filmed the entire incident with his phone. It was not long before the video went viral on social media, and spurred passionate protests across Afghanistan, with women carrying placards and wearing masks of Farkhunda's bloodied face. The murdered Farkhunda became a rallying figure for women's rights[10] in the country and sparked an international cause celebre[11].

But there are downsides as well. An opportunity for local communities is also an opportunity for insurgent and terror groups to enter the social media fray. Doctored images and alternative facts and figures are routinely and systematically disseminated on a variety of platforms and sites. By the time they have been disproven, if challenged at all, the impact has already been made on public opinion.

Moreover, the Taliban have a keen understanding of social media, posting regularly on Twitter since 2011. In an interview last May with Reuters, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said he has a team of writers who consult with fighters (who double as reporters) in 34 provinces across the country. They prepare press statements in five languages and gather footage and photographs shot on smartphones, a modus operandi similar to that of any international news service.

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[10] https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33810338
[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWUprEUygmc&ab_channel=WomenintheWorld

The question of news dissemination in modern war reporting has taken a different aspect in the age of social media, with various actors on the ground now bypassing journalists and accessing global audiences directly using methods that mirror those of standard media outlets. Why bother giving an interview to a foreign reporter who might distort your words or misrepresent your message when a government, opposition, or insurgent group can address the world via Twitter or Facebook? This is not a theoretical question; President Ashraf Ghani has over 600,000 followers on Twitter, and his vice-presidential running mate and former interior minister Amrullah Saleh has nearly 400,000. The Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid himself has more than 89,000 followers.

Reporting to the end

Few Afghanistan observers believe the war will go on for more than a few years. Despite the cancelled Camp David talks[12] which lead to the suspension of the peace talks in September 2019, there is little doubt the international community seeks to continue negotiations. With billions of dollars spent, tens of thousands of lives lost, and terrorism metastasising in other countries with more strategic importance, such as Syria, Mali, and the Sinai Peninsula, Afghanistan war reporting may soon reduce to a trickle. Some pundits believe we are likely to see a repeat of 1989-1996[13] with an unrepresentative government followed by a pivotal civil war. During that time, while reporting may take place, it will occur at a diminished level. In the event the Taliban takes over in toto, there are concerns that we would see even fewer reporters allowed on the ground, relying instead on their own shrewd and enthusiastic use of media.

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[12] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-he-cancelled-secret-meeting-with-afghan-president-taliban-at-camp-david/2019/09/07/650fb3b2-d1c7-11e9-b29b-a528d-c82154a_story.html
[13] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-talks.html

The Afghanistan experience, like the overall media industry since 2001, has gone through numerous transitions. There was a burst of regular war reporting at the beginning, an uptick during the "Surge" of 2009, and then a downturn as the Coalition forces withdrew over the past five years. The shift in reporting has been from the battlefield to the conference room as the environment for reporters has become less secure and more dangerous. And less interesting. There are many lessons of Afghanistan war reporting, including the need for cultural and historical context, the new dangers from IEDs and roadside bombs, the irrelevance of a "PRESS" banner on one's body armour, the new world of social media, and the ascendency of the iPhone camera. These are all lessons that not only transcend Afghanistan, but point the way for current and future generation of war reporters.

For war reporters, and the bureaus that send them, the environment is rapidly changing and increasingly dangerous. The future is unclear, but some lessons to consider may include:

1. Bureaus must acknowledge the risks; they must acknowledge that the best stories may require taking the most risk, and therefore pay to offset that risk. It is unreasonable to demand reporters and photographers absorb this risk as a "cost of the profession" – protecting reporters must be a "cost of doing business". Relying on a cost-cutting mindset to keep the periodical afloat may have the opposite effect as competitors find and publish better stories by underwriting higher security costs.

2. Stringers will increasingly be the "reporter of choice". They have the local knowledge, are more adept at handling local conditions, and are far less costly than non-locals. However, they may carry with them bias and an emotional attachment to the story. War re-

porters must be far more aggressive in selecting the best and most reliable stringers and managing them far more closely than in the past. A good stringer is invaluable, but not so valuable as to allow a discredited story.

3. "iPhone photographers" must be accepted and co-opted. While verifying the accuracy and credibility of the photographs will be difficult, these photographs will be released – whether independently or through one's own publication. Paying for the photographs – perhaps through an on-line exchange – will be yet another cost of doing business, but it is one that competitors certainly pay for.

As all of these recommendations cost money, and the financial pressure on periodicals, online editions, and on-screen news is as bad as it has ever been, the pressure on the bureau will inveigh against spending that money. This is an issue as the alternative for the news business is bleak, and the shuttering of a bureau not only forfeits the space to competitors, but also to the purveyors of fake news. Nonetheless, money cannot solve all of the problems. It still takes a corps of trained journalists and photographers, accompanied (or substituted) by talented stringers to get the story. War journalists today must be faster to compete within the "no-news cycle" timelines, braver on increasingly dangerous and unforgiving battlefields, and more sympathetic to cash-strapped bureaus. It is not an environment for the meek or the mild, nor for the lazy or the unsympathetic – especially when delivering accurate and timely news is more important today than in any time in history.

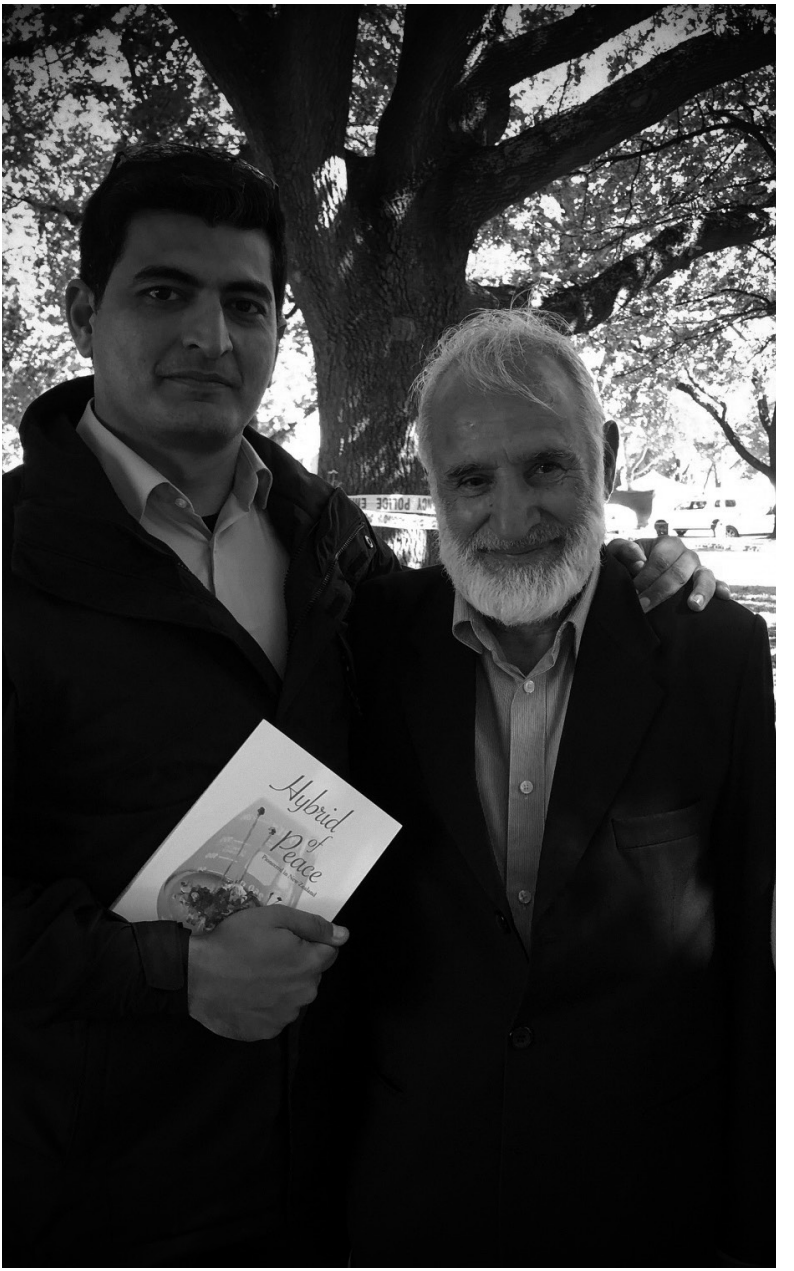
THE LAST PRAYER: **SURVIVING CHRISTCHURCH MASSACRE**

ALI MUSTAFA

The excitement of becoming a father for the first time had kept Ramiz Vora's adrenaline pumping through much of the night, ensuring the young man would remain awake without sleep. He was still in a state of ecstasy; brimming with uncontrollable joy. Yet Ramiz Vora was afraid.

His wife Khusbu had given birth to their first child, a baby girl, weeks premature. Baby Maysa's arrival had lit up the Vora's empty, often struggling lives. Her birth had provided an emotional respite of sorts when they needed it the most.

As persecuted Muslims from the Indian state of Gujarat, their families had barely survived the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in that state. They were allegedly orchestrated under the aegis of Narendra Modi, India's current prime minister, who was the chief minister of Gujarat at the time of the mass rapes and massacres. The now prime minister Modi still maintained he had played no role in the killings, in which at least


Hybrid of Peace

2,000 people – mostly Muslims – had been killed. But Ramiz and Khushbu knew different.

For Khushbu and Ramiz's families, it was the beginning of an almost two-decade ordeal that would see their families displaced at first inside India, and then elsewhere all across the world in search of a safer life.

They had been married less than a year when Ramiz had decided to leave India in the spring of 2013, on a student-visa to study business management in New Zealand. He had first arrived in the city of Auckland for the diploma course where Khushbu would join him a year later. They would eventually settle in the city of Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island.

Now, four miscarriages later, the two Muslims from the Indian state of Gujarat had finally become parents. But the joy had soon led to tense caution. Baby Maysa had been born premature, arriving much earlier than anticipated. Much to the couple's despair, doctors had decided to immediately place the tiny newborn under observation in an intensive care unit at Christchurch Hospital.

Every second that he was unable to hold what he had desired for so long felt like an eternity to Ramiz, remembers Khushbu speaking weeks after giving birth to Maysa.

The Voras had lived in a modest one-bedroom apartment, which had become crowded as Khushbu's pregnancy progressed. Ramiz's parents had arrived to support their son and his wife in anticipation of their granddaughter's birth.

Ramiz, who was still on a student visa, had struggled to find consistent work without having a proper residency status in New Zealand. In the months leading to Maysa's birth, he had found employment at a com-

pany specialising in halal prepared foods, named Tigal Chicken, which was preparing meals as per Islamic traditions to cater to the growing Muslim community in Christchurch. It was through this community that Ramiz and his wife had been able to find some sense of stability and odd jobs to be able to live in what they considered to be one of the safest places on the planet.

Driving through Christchurch, one feels as if passing through a bohemian utopia. Large murals stare out from the side of two and three-story buildings, occupying seemingly strategic spots across town as if nestled in a garden.

Christchurch is a quaint medium-sized town of almost 400,000 people that aspires to be a city. It lies in what is known as the Canterbury region, located on New Zealand's South Island, at the edge of the known world.

Students from Germany buy and sell hatchbacks modified into campers; most included customised wooden racks to support a mattress on top and storage for food and cooking supplies at the bottom. These would be used to circumnavigate the South Island, beginning from and ending in Christchurch.

Despite its rather Christian sounding name, the area is in fact largely controlled by an offshoot of New Zealand's Maori tribe, known as Nagi Tahu. It's the largest Maori group on the South Island and operates much like a corporation, with chapters incorporated in different towns and cities and an organisation run by a chief executive officer as well as a chief operating officer. Despite the corporate veneer, look, and feel, Ngai Tahu is an organisation that is deeply rooted in what it says is a spiritual connection to nature and to the 'sacred' land.

"The Maori were never fully conquered by the imperialists," said the

chief operating officer of Ngai Tahu, Julian Wilcox. Built like a rock, with more than a passing resemblance to Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Wilcox was a former broadcaster and sports journalist who had served on the Ngai Tahu corporate board since 2013. "It is about preserving our culture, our traditions and also to ensure the ability to exert our sovereignty as an independent people," said Wilcox.

The city named after Christ is also an unlikely sanctuary for around 4,000 Muslims from the spectrum of the known Islamic world. They have built a vibrant community in Christchurch, comprising of different cultures and traditions.

"To be honest, the first time I found out there were other Muslims in Christchurch was when I received a call from the city's morgue in 1977," recalled Muhammad Hanif Quazi.

A native of Pakistan's northwest frontier region, in what is now known as the country's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Dr. Quazi is considered one of the world's foremost researchers on plant science and its impact on the global food supply chain.

He first moved to New Zealand with his wife in the late 1960s. He would go on to receive a doctorate with a focus on the morphogenesis of wheat inflorescence, wherein he discovered the vascular system in the spikelet of wheat. A model of the system was published internationally in the *Annals of Botany*. The Doctor of Plant Science would go-on to advise the United Nations as well as many developing countries, including Pakistan's once-ruler General Zia-ul-Haq, on how to achieve sustainable food security.

"They needed someone to perform the Islamic burial rituals, including the cleansing of the body. Because they knew I was Muslim and I had

been practising medicine in Christchurch, and was known in the community, they gave me a call," he remembered of the day he had received a call from the morgue. Now standing in front of Al Nur Mosque, a flat-white structure with an impressive golden dome and slight minaret jetting out, the doctor continued his story, 42 years later.

"I had seen the Islamic burial rituals performed and thus had an idea. So, I called my wife and I told her to bring the Holy Quran to the morgue. When I arrived on location, I met four other men, also Muslims who had also been approached by the morgue to help in the process. I had never met these men before but together, we bathed the deceased man according to what has been proscribed in Islamic law and performed prayers for the departed," said Dr. Quazi. This, according to him, was how the Muslim community had "come together" for the first time in Christchurch.

"Construction on the mosque was completed in 1985. It was a slow process which took three years; but everyone pitched in and made it possible," remembered Hanif Quazi, who had led the initiative for a place of worship for Muslims in Christchurch since receiving that call from the morgue in the late 1970s.

"It felt like a seminal moment. We had arrived and were being accepted" recalled the doctor. He continued, "I remember neighbours living in houses behind and next to the mosque bringing food and chocolates at the opening ceremony, despite not being Muslims. It was a glorious moment," recalled the doctor.

With Hanif Quazi's departure, the Muslim community of Christchurch would take on many new directions. It would go on to include car mechanics from India and doctors from Somalia and techies from Pakistan. There were migrants who had arrived from more than half a dozen Ar-

ab-speaking countries, including those who had come from Morocco and Tunisia. Christchurch was also home to a growing number of migrants from Afghanistan.

Daooud Nabi arrived in Christchurch as a young man in 1977. He had escaped the unfolding civil war in Afghanistan just before the arrival of Soviet tanks in the country.

In his late twenties, with looks to rival movie stars and a spirit to match, Nabi would soon integrate into the culture and became a part of the legacy of Christchurch. With an innate ability to fix anything mechanical, Nabi started repairing motorcycles that brought him in contact with New Zealand's notorious Mongrel Mob.

The Mongrel Mob is an organised street gang with a network of more than thirty chapters throughout New Zealand. It was started by a group of mainly European youngsters in the capital, Wellington, in the 1960s. Legend within the group holds the name originated during a hearing at the Hastings District Court, where a judge referred to early members of the gang as "mongrels".

The name soon caught on by the late 1960s when rebellious young men started calling themselves Mongrels; within a few years, they had started wearing patches symbolising the name "Mongrel Mob".

Its members would often be charged with running drugs and guns and of acts of violence, such as the killings of members of rival gangs. By the time Daoud Nabi arrived in New Zealand, the Mongrel Mob had expanded to include ethnic Maori members, changing its all-white identity. This allowed the group to also accept outsiders from even as far away as Afghanistan, like Nabi, as one of their own; Nabi would reciprocate by servicing the Mongrels bikes for 40 years. Despite ties to the law-breaking

Mongrels, Nabi is said to have remained deeply committed to practising his religion of Islam and would rarely miss an opportunity to pray at the Al Nur mosque, often with his eldest son Yama.

Abdul Aziz Wahabzada was another Christchurch resident originally from Afghanistan. He was thirteen years old in 1986 when he had escaped Soviet occupation with his family. His father, the elder Wahabzada, originally from Kabul's Waisalabad district, had been a clerk in the pro-Soviet government, when he decided to flee the Afghan capital with his wife and eleven children.

The family first moved to Peshawar in neighbouring Pakistan, and over the course of three years, would live in Islamabad and Karachi before finally landing in Australia's largest city, Sydney, in 1989.

A quarrelsome middle child, Abdul Aziz was a teenager by this time and would find it difficult to assimilate into a new life. "We struggled a lot, especially because we were in a foreign country, where we didn't speak the language properly, we were always looked down upon, as outsiders," Abdul Aziz told me in 2019, in his still thick Australian accent.

Over the next twenty-seven years, Aziz would go on to marry a Fijian woman of Indian descent and father eight children – the eldest was twenty-six years old in 2019, while the youngest was six.

In Sydney, Aziz would construct houses for sale but felt something was missing. "It was good business. I made money, but I never felt like it was home. I always thought I would leave one day. When everything was going well - it was all good; but if anything went wrong for some reason, it would always be easy to blame the 'outsider.' After decades of having faced explicit as well as implicit discrimination, Aziz decided it was time to leave.

And 27 years after first arriving in Sydney, Abdul Aziz Wahabzada moved to Christchurch with his wife, two daughters, and six sons. There he would set up AA Antiques, an antique store where one could even buy household supplies and other essential items. Over the course of three years of living there, Aziz became an integral part of Christchurch's Muslim community, which was growing in numbers and in clout.

"Immigration is becoming colonisation, turning Australia from a home into a hotel," wrote Andrew Bolt in a column titled, *The Foreign Invasion* in August 2018. Bolt, who is considered one of Australia's most prominent right-wing voices, is a key part of Rupert Murdoch's media domination strategy. The column, like much else on Murdoch media, was a hit-piece against legal immigration mainly from Asian countries and was syndicated in newspapers across Australia and beyond; accompanied by a cartoon with racist caricatures of Asians, Muslims, and other new arrivals to Australia. It was one of many examples of the mainstreaming of hate in Australia, a process promoted by Murdoch's vast media empire through syndicated newspaper columns like Bolt's and dozens of radio stations owned and operated by Murdoch media.

Who Watches the Media, a research report on racist attitudes in Australian media released in 2017, found that of 124 race-related opinion pieces published in the first seven months of that year, 62 were potentially in breach of one or more industry codes of conduct, because of racist content.

The report defined racism as unjust covert or overt behaviour towards a person or a group on the basis of their racial background, perpetrated by a person, a group, an organisation, or a system.

Muslims were portrayed more negatively than the other minority groups, with 63 per cent of reports about Muslims framed negatively.

These pieces often conflated Muslims with terrorism. For example, reports used terrorist attacks in the UK to question accepting Muslim refugees and immigrants to Australia.

The report, which focused on opinion-based pieces in eight Australian newspapers, found that negative race-related reports were most commonly published in publications which were run by the Murdoch-owned News Corp.

"My dad is hooked on it," said a baffled Nicole Johnston one of Australia's most experienced international war correspondents, who had lived and reported out of the Middle East and North Africa for almost two decades. "He was a very reasonable man for a farmer in Australia. I'm proof of it (she said laughing). But now he hates anyone who isn't white immigrating to Australia, especially Muslims," said Johnston who had spent years reporting from Gaza and the occupied West Bank for Al Jazeera English. She continued, "the only explanation I have is the vitriol my dad hears day-in, day-out on Murdoch-owned radio stations". The hate broadcast on Murdoch media would soon find its way onto various platforms, such as discussion forums on the far-right 8-chan and conversations between gamers in the multi-player game, Fortnite.

"They exist in bedrooms, on internet forums and their communities aren't in a specific geography – they are international. This is the problem we face" decried Jarrod Gilbert, a sociologist and expert on criminal justice and gangs who teaches at the University of Canterbury. He observed how it was easier to identify far-right members in the past, when they were hanging out on street corners in daylight, saying in comparison that "online communities are impossible to estimate and ascertain the size of the threat." Without boundaries, hate, either spewed on Murdoch media outlets or via websites and in podcasts, could take a very violent turn.

"I didn't want my children to face the same discrimination I had to suffer," said Abdul Aziz Wahabzada.

"Christchurch in New Zealand was the most obvious choice because I had an idea about the mindset; as in the racism I faced in Australia wouldn't be a factor here. And it was a beautiful, peaceful place. Like a heaven on earth," said Aziz.

But not everyone who had decided to settle in Christchurch came in search of paradise.

Brent Tarrant had moved to the city to raise some hell. The blonde Australian was born in the small town of Grafton in New South Wales. He worked as a fitness trainer in the town until around 2006. Four years later, his father Rodney died of cancer at the age of 49. Rodney's death would mark a turning point in Brenton's life. It would set him on a path where he would challenge conventional ideas in the dark, reclusive domains of an online world where voices on the peripheries of mainstream society had taken centre stage.

Reports suggest Tarrant had quit his job at the fitness club to travel the world with the inheritance left behind by his father. He would visit several European countries, as well as take a tour of North Korea and visit Pakistan's northern regions. However, it is a visit to Turkey where his ideas against Islam in general and Muslims in particular would start to take a violent turn. He visited several sites associated with the country's pre-Islamic Christian past, such as the prison where Vlad the Impaler was imprisoned by the conquering Ottoman Turks in the 1400s. History records the former as having a penchant for impaling enemies, leaving their heads on stakes, thus earning him the nom de guerre of The Impaler. The historical figure was immortalised as the fictional vampire Dracula in Bram Stoker's book of the same name.

During his travels, Brent Tarrant also made contact with imprisoned Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik. Breivik had murdered 77 people, mostly teen activists, on an island near Oslo. The crime is considered Norway's biggest massacre since World War II.

Hours before the attack, Breivik had e-mailed a 1500-page manifesto to 6,000 people, titled 2083 - *A European Declaration of Independence*. In the document, Breivik attacked multiculturalism and the "threat" of Muslim immigration to Norway, as well as Marxism and the Norwegian Labor Party. Breivik copied large sections of the US Unabomber manifesto. In the document, Brievik called himself a "saviour of Christianity," and claimed he belonged to an order of the "Knights Templar".

Breivik was sentenced to 21 years in prison on August 24, 2012, the maximum sentence allowed in Norway. Although the mass murderer can be released after serving his twenty-one-year sentence, he will likely have his sentence extended for the rest of his life due to the severity of his crimes.

Once in New Zealand, Brenton Tarrant would go on to join the Bruce Rifle Club where he would hone his marksmanship. "The ethos within the club concerned me," one of the club's former patron's Pete Breidahl told the NewsHub website. "It was like being at a 1980s US National Rifle Association or NRA meeting. It was the perfect breeding place for radicalism," he said.

"Christchurch and the wider South Island have a long history of 'skinhead' white supremacism stretching back to the 1970s," said Gilbert. "There were "thugs" standing on street corners, yelling abuse at people of colour. While the numbers of traditional skinheads had decreased in the region, the numbers of "incognito" alt-right members had swollen, emboldened by the election of far-right global leaders, and the "unwill-

ingness of some authorities to crack down on white-supremacist violent ideology," he said.

Sardar Faisal Abbas was born in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1983 in to a military family. There he would go on to attend the prestigious Army Public School (APS) in the mid-nineties, eventually earning Bachelors and Master's degrees in Computer Science. He had committed to a future in Pakistan, where his roots remained.

All of that changed in late 2014 when at least 140 people, a majority of them students from Faisal's alma mater APS, were killed in a brutal attack carried out by the Pakistani Taliban, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TPP). "That was the tipping point, when I finally decided to get a skilled migrant visa for New Zealand and move there. It was an easy decision because New Zealand was considered one of the safest countries in the world," Faisal told me in 2019.

Faisal would go on to leave Pakistan a few months later, arriving in Auckland in 2015 with an aim to secure a job and establish himself before flying his family to join him in New Zealand. But it was not easy going. Unable to find a job in the profession he had studied for, and struggling through odd jobs to pay the rent and bills, Faisal persevered, and his hard work would soon lead to an IT job at Abley Transportation Consultants in Christchurch. This is where he settled with his family in 2016, a year after Ramiz and Khushbu had arrived.

Naeem and Amber Rashid also arrived in Christchurch in search of a better life for their two sons, Talha and Ibrahim. They had followed in the footsteps of Amber's brother-in-law, Nadeem Khan, who was married to Amber's sister. Nadeem was one of the first Pakistanis to have settled in Christchurch in the 1980s and was well established in the city, working in local government for quite some time.

Naeem and Amber would live a modest life in Christchurch, but they ensured their sons received first-class education to set them up for the future. The parents also wanted their children to follow their faith; to believe in one god as revealed through the Islamic holy book, the Quran, and to freely join their small community of Muslims every Friday for afternoon prayers at Al Nur Mosque.

They all came together at Al Nur Mosque, which was to become a central feature for the community of followers, especially for Friday prayers. It was a chance to socialise and catch up at the end of the workweek.

Despite its centrality to so many lives, the mosque itself remained in a dilapidated condition. Al Nur's impressive golden dome was made of fibreglass, which had run its course.

"So, when I first came here, there was a lot of work to be done in terms of maintaining the mosque. Being a person with a mechanical engineering background, I focused on improving tangible things, like technology and trying to improve the day to day experience in the mosque, so I thought it was a very important responsibility I was given and I tried to use my skill set for the betterment of the community and myself" said twenty-five-year-old Ayman Jabala, originally from Tunisia. "There were wiring issues all over the place. Everything felt like it was falling apart. We were keeping it running with duct tape, spit, and a lot of prayers," recalled Jabala, who had decided to help out at the Al Nur mosque, volunteering as a facilities manager.

"It might sound like a cliché, but there's no typical day. We understood what the priorities were and the fact that we were a small community in New Zealand and smaller in Christchurch. You are restricted by resources, so the wild ideas you have about building car parks and all that stuff that would solve the problem there and then, you have to be real-

istic and be cautious about what you attempt to put money in, because its public money, because on judgement day you'll be asked on every dollar you've spent, so we had to find out what was really necessary and go from there," said Jabala. "All the great work was done by volunteers; there were a couple of issues with the dome and the internal kitchen, and a wet moist room needed a carpet. There were missing doors, poor execution of doors, lots of small things," he added.

Ramiz Vora woke up early from an uneasy, sleepless night on the morning of March 15, 2019. To his wife Khushbu, "he was driven by an invisible force". "He seemed agitated," remembered Khushbu, saying her husband's mind raced between their small single-story apartment and the tiny incubator in the intensive care unit at Christchurch hospital, where their baby daughter Maiysa lay in wait, to be held by her father for the first time. Ramiz had planned on dropping his wife and mother at the hospital so they could check up on the baby. "Ramiz then took my father-in-law, Asif uncle to Al Nur mosque for Friday prayers and said he would pick us up later," she remembered. "He told me that we would go to buy groceries after the prayers".

Ayman Jabala was looking forward to the end of the week. "Friday is quite structured when it comes to work. It's the end of the week, so the way it works in the summers with daylight savings, is that I usually arrive at the mosque around one-fifteen in the afternoon as I did that day," recalled Jabala.

It was around the time Sardar Faisal Abbas pulled up to the driveway of the mosque's parking lot. He had forgotten to perform the pre-prayer ablution as he usually did at work. "I am one of the 50 or 60 people who are the first to arrive at the mosque every Friday. So, I parked my car, clipped my nails and went inside, making my way to the toilet to perform ablution before prayers," remembered Faisal.

Haji Daoud Nabi was standing at the entrance of the mosque, "shuffling between the main prayer hall and the corridor leading to the door," according to Mir Wais of the Christchurch Afghan association, who was also present at the mosque at that time.

Nabi is said to have greeted Brenton Tarrant with the words "Hello brother" before being gunned down by the shooter. The killing of the Sexagenarian started the worst massacre in New Zealand's history, with Tarrant live-streaming the hell he was unleashing on those gathered in a place of worship for what would be their Last Prayer.

"At first, I thought It must be a short circuit or something, and maybe I should go out and help and as I was opening the door, I heard another two shots," remembered a still shaken Faisal Abbas. "So, I locked myself up".

Ayman Jabala was down the hallway – waiting to pray in the main hall. "As soon as I sat down, I heard the first shot. I thought it must be a light bulb, then the second shot, and I was still in denial. And some people were running straight. I didn't even know who to look at; all I was caring for was myself at that point. And there was the right-hand side wall and I jumped right over it. I was still in denial. I was still thinking at that time, these must be blanks."

"People that he was killing – they were screaming. And he was just firing. And I started calling the emergency services. I had no idea what to tell them. I was whispering *101 Dean's Ave shooting* – I can't whisper. It was really difficult I was not shaking at that time – literally – the phone was in my hands and my mouth was literally close to the phone," said Faisal, holding his hands close to his mouth and reproducing his actions on the day of the shooting.

Brenton Tarrant killed forty-four people at Al Nur mosque before driving off to his next target, Linwood mosque. But the shooter would continue to unleash hell along the way.

Yasir Amin and his 67-year-old father Muhammad were making their way to al Nur when they saw a silver hatchback approach. “The killer maybe he was just 20 meters away from us. Because I saw him, I ran away straight away…And after three or four seconds, I just sat down on the ground and turned back. I noticed when he drove away the car, I went back to my dad because by that time I wasn’t sure if he got any bullet, but when I saw him lying on the ground there was lots of blood around his body,” said a shaken Amin.

As police arrived at Al Nur mosque, which was the scene of the first attack, they found Faisal Abbas hiding in the toilet. “I shouted out; I am the one who called you. Can I come out? They were like, yes, come out. But slowly, so we can search you, which they did. Then the policeman said, “just put down your head and exit – don’t stop – don’t look down. Just run!”

Around this time Haji Daoud Nabi’s son Yama arrived at the location as the police cordoned the area off. “Next to the doorway at the mosque, there was a body lying - my heart was saying that’s dad. I couldn’t see his face, but my heart was saying that’s dad, so I was telling the police officer, please let me in. Just let me go there see my dad, but the officers they were doing their duty,” said a visibly upset Yama days after the shooting.

“When it really hit me was when we saw people coming out of the mosque with wounds. I saw someone on the ground and someone covering him, I didn’t understand then I saw someone carrying his four-

year-old dead son in his arms," remembered Ayman Jabala, who by this time was soaked in the blood of others, but still assisting the injured get help.

Twenty-four-year-old Shafiq accompanied three of his younger brothers and their father Abdul Aziz Wahabzada to the Linwood mosque in the eastern part of Christchurch.

It was around 2 pm in the afternoon on Friday, 15 March 2019, and Aziz was ensuring his sons would continue the traditions of their forefathers; showing up to the mosque for Friday prayers every week.

"I heard gunshots outside as soon as we sat down to hear the sermon," remembered Aziz.

"There were between 80 to 100 people who had assembled to perform Friday prayers at Linwood at the time the shooting started. I was inside with four of my sons when I heard the first gunshots" remembered Aziz, who ran outside after telling his sons not to follow him. "There was a credit card reader machine on the front desk so I just grabbed it" he said. "Outside I saw one man wearing army camouflage and a bullet-proof vest firing indiscriminately at people," recalled Abdul Aziz Wahabzada.

"I shouted out, "who the hell are you?!" exclaimed Aziz. "He had run out of ammunition and started swearing," recalled Abdul Aziz, speaking days after Tarrant's attack on the mosque on Linwood avenue. "As he turned to pick up another weapon. I threw the credit card machine that was in my hand at him" said an excitable Aziz. "The shooter then managed to grab another gun from his car and started shooting at me, and I tried to dunk between the cars parked in the parking lot." Aziz says as he was trying to find cover, he saw a dead body with a shotgun next to him.

"I just picked up the shotgun and pulled the trigger, but there was no bullet in it" it was then that Aziz heard gunshots coming from inside the mosque. Realising the gunman had made his way to a place where four of his children were holed up with at least eighty other worshippers, Aziz ran inside with the empty gun and immediately started to draw the gunman's attention towards himself.

"I started yelling at him, I'm here! I'm here! Come towards me! I don't know if the gunman saw me holding the empty shotgun, but the shooter dropped the gun in his hands and ran outside. I ran behind him. But I couldn't catch up because he was already in his car on the driveway, on his way out. So, the empty shotgun in my hands, I threw it like an arrow on his car's back window and smashed it…"

"…At that time, I could tell he was frightened, and he just gave me the middle finger and said I'll kill all of you and just drove off. He slowed down at a red traffic light, so I picked up the gun and tried to chase him, but by then he was gone," remembered Aziz.

Brenton Tarrant was apprehended near his car shortly after on March 15, 2019. He had killed 51 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch.

"When I came out, I had 80 missed calls on my phone and on my WhatsApp I had over 300 messages. I had sent my wife a message at around 1:52 when it was almost over when the guy was leaving and when I came out, she was the first one I texted…excuse me…" said Faisal Abbas as he started to cry. Then wiping off the tears from his eyes, he continues "I told her you were the last one I had texted…and the first one when I came out…(wipes tears off eyes), so I explained it to her….that you were the last one because I wanted to make sure that I am alive… and I wanted you to not know, till I tell you I am alive," said Faisal Abbas, emotional as he wiped his eyes with a soft tissue.

"Everyone was screaming, please bring in the ambulances. Please bring in the ambulances" and the police were saying, "we are waiting for the signal from inside," remembered Faisal Abbas. "Once they gave an all-clear – that's when the ambulances were allowed."

"There was a construction company guy there, who said to me, 'I have a truck and we can take three or four injured to the hospital. Will you help me?' I said 'yes, I will definitely help you.' We put four people, one of Indian descent, another Egyptian, and two Jordanians," said Faisal Abbas.

"The way he was driving. It was crazy. He had panicked too, because it was an emergency. Because he was like "I don't know if they'll live but let's make sure we can save every person we can. And then we came from the South of Dean's Ave... It was packed at the time because they were not even moving, the cars were stopped, so we had to go over the curb and straight to the emergency," said Faisal Abbas. When we got there, one of the guys, I think he was shot in the left thigh and we had helped him in. And I clearly remember he said, my shoes, my shoes, and I said brother, what are you going to do with your shoes, and he said I need my shoes. So, I went back and got them from the truck, and as I did, one of the nurses asked me why I had come back? I said because I wanted to give him his shoes and she said, but you are barefooted yourself." Faisal said, smiling at his luck at having survived New Zealand's worst massacre barefoot.

"I just continually called my husband, and he was not picking up," recalled Khushbu Vora as she anxiously waited for any word on Ramiz, while caring for a week-old baby, about to be discharged from intensive care. "So, I thought maybe his mobile was in the car," she said. "So, I was literally angry at him. I kept asking myself; Why isn't Ramiz picking up the phone? It's never happened before."

That morning Amber Rashid was preparing an evening meal for a family gathering when she received a curious call from her sister inquiring about Naeem and Talha's whereabouts.

"She knew it was Friday. So why was she asking me where they are?" remembered Amber, continuing. "She knew they were at the masjid. Then she told me "there's been a shooting at the masjid and many people had died. As soon as I heard this, I checked my mobile phone. Naeem was a very caring person and I knew he'd contact me first to let me know that he was OK – But there was no message – and then I tried to call him and Talha – I had a feeling something was wrong. Around four or five o'clock the news started coming out on TV – and the number of casualties kept rising," she said. Amber would soon learn of their fate through the video the alleged shooter Brent Tarrant had live-streamed across social media platforms which had now been picked up in rolling news coverage across all channels. "As soon as I saw it, I could see Naeem there," said Amber, holding back tears while trying to maintain her composure as she recalled the moment she realised her husband of 25 years and their 22-year-old son were dead.

"They are not giving any news to us and I had to stay two nights with my baby at the hospital because I had to feed her -- and I asked my brother-in-law who had arrived from Australia by this time to tell me what had happened to Ramiz, and he just told me that Ramiz is no more. And then I just broke down," said Khushbu Vora.

Brenton Tarrant laid out his plans of what would become New Zealand's worst terrorist attack in a seventy-four-page document, titled ***The Great Replacement***, a reference to the "Great Replacement" and "white genocide" conspiracy theories.

In the manifesto released just before the massacres, Tarrant describes himself as a "racist" and a "fascist" and said he was "protecting the Christian race".

"I am just an ordinary White man born to a low-income working-class family," wrote Tarrant under the subheading ***In general, who are you?.*** He continued that he had been working part-time as a Kebab Removalist, a reference to an anti-Muslim propaganda music video from the Yugoslav Wars. The phrase has spread globally among white supremacists as a meme which references the ethnic cleansing of Muslims.

Tarrant wrote he had "decided to show the invaders that our lands will never be their lands, our homelands are our own and that as long as a white man still lives, they will NEVER conquer our lands."

"I decided to take a stand to ensure a future for my people," Tarrant said, wanting his attack to send a message that "nowhere in the world is safe" for non-white non-Christians.

"*Spyro the Dragon* 3 taught me ethno-nationalism. Fortnite taught me to be a killer and to floss the corpses of my enemies," wrote Tarrant in another passage alluding to an in-joke in the alt-right movement on how shooter games online had become organising grounds where members could meet, plan, and "kill" without consequence. It was on these platforms that Brent Tarrant would be radicalised and desensitised to people who looked and worshipped differently to him.

Another early clue as to the shooter's motives had come through the writings and inscriptions painted on his weapons, visible in the livestream of the attacks on social media platforms.

In all, Tarrant had used five guns in the attack, including two semiautomatic weapons, two shotguns, and a "lever-action firearm" that he had

legally purchased with a valid gun license he obtained in November 2017.

There were dates, symbols, and names considered significant to the White Nationalist movement.

The weapons featured names of mass murderers such as French-Canadian Alexandre Bissonnette, responsible for the 2017 mosque shooting in Quebec City where he killed six people and injured another nineteen. Bissonnette saw Canada's pro-immigration policies as a threat to its "White identity".

The guns also had the name of Italian white-extremist Luca Traini inscribed, who injured African migrants in 2018 in a racially motivated attack in the city of Macerata.

Tarrant's gear also featured the symbol of the "Black Sun," which dates back to the Nords of ancient Europe, but was later appropriated by the Nazis when it became a symbol of white power.

One of the AR15's Brenton Tarrant used also had the symbol 14 words inscribed on it; shorthand for a white supremacist slogan in Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf, which calls for securing a future for the children of the white race. Additionally, one had 'Here's your Migration Compact' inscribed on it, in reference to a United Nations compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, a non-binding pact signed by several UN member states in 2018.

The 4000 Muslims in Christchurch were a mosaic of linguistic and cultural nuances, which were threatened in the attack's aftermath. Of the 44 worshippers killed at Al Nur mosque, there were at least 20 nationalities. Palestinians holding different nationalities counted for many of those killed, and there were also nine Pakistani passport holders, with

the latter's families and relatives ably supported by Moazzem Baig of the Embassy of Pakistan in Wellington. By way of example, he was among the first diplomats to have assisted prompt visa requests from grieving families back in Pakistan, as well as arrange for the repatriation of bodies by families who had requested it. He had also helped families of other nationals, such as Afghans and Bangladeshis, to repatriate their dead or have their families brought to Christchurch.

"The attacks – an act of hate – led to an outpouring of love. Love and support for the Muslim community. You would have heard the Prime Minister and others say tato tato (in Maori) which means 'all of us', it's all of New Zealand, Its Maori, its non-Maori, it's the Muslim community," said Wilcox.

"What words adequately express the pain and suffering of 50 men, women and children lost and so many injured," said New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, in a memorial marking a week since the attacks on March 15. Addressing tens of thousands of mourners from around New Zealand, including the Turkish vice president Fuat Oktay, who had arrived in Christchurch directly from Turkey alongside Turkey's foreign minister Mevlut Cavusolgu, Jacinda Ardern pressed on with a steely resolve in her voice.

"What words capture the anguish of our Muslim community being the target of hatred and violence. What words express the pain of a city that has already known so much pain. I thought there were none and then I came here and was met with the simple greet: *Assalam Alaikum* (Peace be upon you)."

"How can this happen in a place like Christchurch? Why would he attack this beautiful place of worship in front of this beautiful park?" said Doctor Hanif Quazi, standing in front of the cordoned-off Al Nur

mosque compound, pointing across towards Hagley Park, which also housed the cricket pitch at the Hagley Oval.

Haji Daoud Nabi's casket received a 40-motorbike escort to its final burial place – courtesy of the Mongrel Mob. It was their final parting gift to the man who had fixed and repaired their bikes for over 40 years.

"These are people who are on the fringes of our society who have decided to come forward in whatever way they can. And for many people like the gangs in New Zealand, they have shown their support directly by putting a protection ring around the mosques in some instances in these uncertain times," said Wilcox of Ngai Tahu.

"The person who has perpetuated this violence is against us is not us. They have no place in New Zealand," said Ardern New Zealand's Prime Minister, while condemning Tarrant's actions.

"I feel sorry for the attacker because he had hate in his heart and he can't feel the happiness, the satisfaction and contentment that we do," said Amber Rashid, with a slight smile on her face. She had spent the previous 45 minutes opening up for the first time about the death of her loved ones a few days earlier. "Because he has a heart full of hate. And we have a heart full of love. And my husband and my son, they had a heart full of love" she said.

Abdul Aziz Wahabzada was hailed as a hero by people across New Zealand for his actions in trying to stop Brent Tarrant from killing more people at Linwood mosque. Wahabzada said his fight has not ended; he is now standing up for the rights of the survivors who are suffering from non-physical trauma as a result of the attack but have received no compensation from the authorities.

Five years since she had first arrived in the country on a visa sponsored

by her husband, Khushbu Vora became a permanent resident of New Zealand, a dream her husband Ramiz had long dearly held but hadn't been able to fulfil. For a country with some of the toughest immigration laws in the world, New Zealand offered residency to the families of all of the people who had been killed at Christchurch's twin mosques.

Less than a month after the attacks, New Zealand's parliament voted to ban the sale of most semi-automatic and military-style weapons.

Speaking before lawmakers, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she knew her country would approve a ban after the police commissioner described the deadly nature of the guns used in the attack, which had been obtained legally and easily modified to hold more than 60 bullets per magazine. "I could not fathom how weapons that could cause such destruction and large-scale death could have been obtained legally in this country," Ardern said.

Brenton Tarrant was sentenced to life in prison in August 2020 after admitting to murdering worshipers at Christchurch's mosque. "Your crimes are so wicked that even if you are detained until you die, it will not exhaust the requirements of punishment," said Judge Cameron Mander in a Christchurch court.

On the last day of a four-day sentencing hearing, Justice Mander spent almost an hour reminding Tarrant of each person he killed and injured.

He added that despite the Tarrant's guilty pleas, the culprit appeared "neither contrite nor ashamed".

Tarrant, who said through a lawyer in court that he did not oppose the prosecution's application for a life without parole sentence, did not react to the sentence. He had earlier also refused the right to speak at his sentencing.

The sentencing hearing began on Monday, with a large part of the first three days dedicated to hearing victim impact statements.

Tarrant appeared largely emotionless over the past three days, as almost 90 victims - some grieving, others defiant - confronted him.

Ahad Nabi, Haji Daoud Nabi's son, looked Tarrant in the eyes and said "Your father was a garbage man and you became the trash of society, you deserve to be buried in a landfill."

"You hurt my father, but you never took him away from me – what I mean by this is that you physically hurt him but you gifted my father with becoming a martyr."

REPORTING KASHMIR, A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT

BABA UMAR

Not long ago, I was assigned a story on "the cost of an Indian bullet" in Kashmir.

My former editor Shujaat Bukhari was keen to trace the journey a single bullet takes and its total cost to the government – from manufacturing in Indian ordnance factories to transport in high-altitude India-administered Kashmir, while factoring in government compensation to families if the bullet kills a civilian, or reward money to soldier if it kills a rebel fighter.

This was in 2010 when the massive anti-New Delhi protests – sparked first by the sequential killings of Kashmiri men and boys and then by a staged gun battle by Indian troops – were at their peak. The cyclic killings, cordons, curfews, protests, and the cumulative violence offered little time to work on lengthy investigative pieces like "the cost of an Indian bullet" in Kashmir. By the end of 2010, I left Bukhari's *Rising Kashmir* newspaper for a new publication after having worked there for more than three years; his nascent idea would not develop into a story.

Fast-forward to June 14, 2018.

As Kashmir prepared to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr and *Rising Kashmir* was publishing its holiday edition, a hail of gunfire outside the newspaper office in main Srinagar city left bullet holes on the glass and the body of a black SUV. Bukhari and his guards had just stepped into the vehicle after leaving work when three unidentified gunmen on a single motorcycle showered bullets on them. Someone had attempted to assassinate the senior journalist in 2006 too, forcing him to accept the government-sponsored security. The 2006 attempt on his life came ten years after his kidnapping in 1996 by gunmen, incidentally, linked to the Indian government itself. But today, Bukhari was unlucky. A few minutes was all it took for the assassins to carry out the triple killing and flee.

The narrative war began. The Indian administration and media immediately blamed anti-New Delhi rebels for the act. The rebel groups conversely blamed secret Indian agencies for the assassination, in what

they said was a bid to taint the popular armed opposition to India's rule in the disputed region. Rumours ran wild.

A former newspaper colleague told me of wild talks of possible attacks on journalists by both sides: "There's a talk that journalists seen sympathetic to the rebel cause by the Indian government or those perceived close to rebels by Indian politicians and the army could be hit. Everyone is frightened. We are taking extreme caution."

Bukhari's family and his friends had no choice but to accept the existence of competing narratives – it was either an Indian or rebel's bullet that killed him. But as to which side precisely, they are still not sure. Four months before his murder, Bukhari had made an apt statement on the tenth anniversary of *Rising Kashmir*: "Survival is the first challenge for any journalism venture in Kashmir."

Kashmir has never been a harmless place for the independent press. Journalists walk on a razor's edge in the Himalayan region - between India and Pakistan since 1947. Both countries claim it in entirety but rule it in portions. The ongoing armed conflict in India-administered Kashmir began in 1989 when a popular armed revolt against Indian rule commenced in response to mass rigging of local elections by pro-India parties and mass detentions of opposition members.

That year, local Kashmiri journalists – otherwise covering civic or environmental issues – suddenly morphed into conflict reporters. The deadly war, participated in by over 500,000 Indian troops, thousands of police, and hundreds of pro-independence or pro-Pakistan rebel fighters, immediately brought another party to the conflict: the corporatised and nationalistic 21st Century Indian media.

Media Wars

The Kashmir conflict is reported on by the dominant Indian media, the often-gagged local Kashmiri media, and a few foreign news outlets; the region remains a perfect laboratory to observe contending narratives and the battle for media spaces.

On one side is the veritable arm of the mighty Indian state, the Indian media. They see Kashmir as a national project to be rescued from Pakistan's influence and from the hands of local media which sympathises with the largely Muslim inhabitants – who in turn empathise with the rebels' cause of independence. Thus, media ethics, objectivity, and moral responsibility have become fanciful terms for Indian media.

On the other side are local and foreign media (with correspondents in the region) who have tried to cover the conflict with impartiality despite enormous pressures. In fact, local media is often muzzled. The under-paid journalists are frequently threatened; their phones get tapped, and their mail gets checked. Indian government advertisements, which are crucial for a news outlet's viability in Kashmir, are supplied or annulled depending on the quality and quantity of the perceived criticism of the Indian state in the paper – part of its wider and tacit 'carrots and sticks policy.' Rebel groups too wield pressure on journalists. But, lately, it has been one-sided.

The gagging of local press reached its crescendo when India abrogated Kashmir's limited autonomy on August 5, 2019, and dispatched tens of thousands of extra troops to reinforce the half a million already stationed there. The unilateral move to abrogate nominal autonomy – key to Kashmir's 1947 accession treaty with India – was widely controver-

sial. Mobile and internet services were suspended *sine die*, while the main highways and roads were blocked to scuttle possible protests. Even as some mobile services were resumed after two months, the internet remains partially blocked. Journalists, many of whom were trapped in the unprecedented curfew, could not properly cover the watershed moment [dubbed "illegal annexation" by Kashmir's resistance groups and Pakistan] in Kashmir's chequered history. The stringers, or freelancers, working with international media had to fly out of Kashmir to New Delhi with images and videos stored in USB flash and hard drives.

The silencing of local Kashmiri media was highlighted in a few recent reports. Independent fact-finding missions travelling from India found alarming levels of repression against the media. They found reporters were being subjected to surveillance, informal investigations, and harassment for publishing reports considered adverse to the government or security forces. One report titled "News behind the barbed wire"[1] revealed "a grim and despairing picture of the media in Kashmir, fighting for survival against the most incredible of odds." Prepared by the Network of Women in Media and the Free Speech Collective, India-based associations, it highlighted that recent editorials in major Kashmiri newspapers were only covering innocuous topics, such as the benefits of Vitamin A, and "Should you consume caffeine during summer?"

One senior journalist who flew to New Delhi for a break told me over the phone that newspapers were carrying editorials on Yemen conflict and Syria's war "but they do not have the audacity to write on the ongoing Kashmir crisis."

[1] https://www.nwmindia.org/resources/research-and-documentation/news-behind-the-barbed-wire-kashmirs-information-blockade/

Kashmir remains out of bounds for foreign media personnel. They are forbidden from entering the valley unless they have written authorisation from the Indian home ministry. That approval is rarely granted. In the post-August 5 abrogation scenario as well, international coverage on Kashmir came from local Kashmiri stringers, despite facing a multitude of obstacles.

With local media tamed and a huge section of Indian media staunchly statist, it's the international media that has lately led the fair coverage on Kashmir, much to the chagrin of New Delhi. Certain Indian media like *The Indian Express, Quint, The Wire, and Scroll.in* have been most accurate in trying to cover the story. Still, they remain marginal compared to the powerful jingoistic TV channels and the larger corporate media.

Western media may offer slanted coverage of events in the Middle East[2], especially when it comes to Palestine, but in Kashmir, they have become the sole source that is trustworthy. In fact, so much so that Indian media anchors often berate the Western press for "peddling fake news"[3] on Kashmir.

A minefield of media vocabulary

"Kashmir, a graveyard of reputations," is a popular phrase in the disputed region. Nobody knows who coined it first. Perhaps it was worded to

[2] https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/4/9/western-media-and-mass-deception/
[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKz_7z9O0Gc&ab_channel=TRTWorld
[4] https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/india-s-torture-methods-new-claims-emerge-from-disputed-kashmir-29879

mimic the "Afghanistan, a graveyard of empires" idiom. In the lingua franca of local Kashmiri journalists and media commentators, it is used to mock the commitment of Indian journalists who report Kashmir either from the outside or are embedded with the Indian government forces. No matter how neutral a news organisation or its journalist, a large section of the Indian media toes the government stance on events inside Kashmir. That is why, despite an unprecedented near-total lockdown of some eight million inhabitants in the region and multiple reports[4] of brutal torture[5] by the Indian forces in Kashmir's villages and towns, Kashmir is projected by Indian media as a normal place, where people have accepted the fait accompli. The abnormal became normal. To describe this vast credibility deficit, Rana Ayub, a senior Indian journalist and *Washington Post* writer, observed:[6] "Indian media is viewed with suspicion and anger in Kashmir. There is growing resentment over the skewed coverage. Most [Indian] journalists have resorted to simply reproducing official government lies."

Let me illustrate this with an example. In 2016, a molestation case of a young Kashmiri girl involving an Indian army soldier incited protests in northern Handwara area in Kashmir and five civilians were shot dead. There were accusations and counter-accusations. A media war followed; the local newspapers largely stuck to the basics. It was the type of news that required voices from all sides, and ignoring one pressure group, such as pro-India politicians, the police, the military, or pro-resistance groups, over the other could have come with retaliation – like imprisonment. But a sustained and flagrant effort was made to paint a different picture of the incidents that led to the killings by India's top English language newspaper, *Times of India*.

[5] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49481180
[6] https://twitter.com/RanaAyyub/status/1169848649465024515?s=20

Its first four news stories, written by senior journalist Aarti Tickoo Singh, termed the protesters as 'mob.' The Kashmiri girl's accusation was declared a 'wild rumour.' An anonymous observer in Delhi was quoted who again repeated: "Mischievous rumours blaming [Indian] army for the alleged molestation." In one story 'mob' was used five times; in the next, the word appeared six times. Notably, contrary to Singh's right-wing perspective, the last story on the case written by the paper's Fozia Yasin had ground reportage without any propositions or slant.

This shows the framework under which some journalists work in Kashmir. Nevertheless, young journalists must understand that editing does not usually start at the desk – it begins in the head of the author of the news report. It is the journalist in the field who chooses what to observe, what news angle to pick-up, and how to frame a story with what vocabulary before the copy goes to the copyeditor. The latter is usually in a hurry and may sometimes have no idea about the context the journalist is following and simply amends the piece for grammar, structure, and typos.

When it comes to the Kashmir dispute, the battle for narrative control is fought on all levels, and the media is very much a part of it. I often argue that Kashmir has essentially become a quadrilateral dispute between Kashmiris, Pakistan, India, and the colossal Indian media, the latter having altered its narrative on Kashmir after increased commercialisation and nationalisation. Indian media have effectively added to the decades-old antagonism between Pakistan and India, instead of de-escalating tensions between the nuclear rivals.

Coming back to the media terminology, killings are somehow vindicated by Indian media because peaceful Kashmiri 'protesters', we are told,

are actually 'violent mobs', thus supposedly justifying force. In some government communiques, this 'mobster' sometimes dies of 'cardiac arrest' or 'blood loss' after being shot dead, and not from government bullets. The weak heart and the absent blood in the body absolves the State of the killing. The use of terminology is imperative in influencing our opinions, outlooks, and actions, and our thinking can be defined by the interplay of these expressions.

The terminology used by a segment of powerful Indian media, represented these days mostly by the far-right, jingoistic, and militaristic journalists, is so influential that sometimes even the victims of this conflict unknowingly acquiesce into accepting the vocabulary. Here, journalism school theories of agenda-setting and the hypodermic magic-bullet come to mind. The former says the media sets the agenda and efficiently determines which issues the audience must discuss. The latter says the media aims and "shoots" information at a passive and susceptible audience. Both are prominent in Kashmir, advanced by faraway TV studios and newspapers.

Kashmir's noted rights activist Parveena Ahanger, whose son was picked up by the Indian army in the early 90s and never returned, often calls her disappeared son's uniformed abductors 'security forces', and the 'custodial disappearance' of the boy a 'missing' case. Ahanger is illiterate, yet she has fought for decades and represented hundreds of families of those who disappeared in the custody of government forces. However, it must be noted that many of her interviews on her son's enforced disappearance are laced with expressions that could make her case ambivalent to an outside audience.

[7] https://apdpkashmir.com/168/

The Indian media spin is palpable when it comes to framing a story on those subjected to enforced disappearance. There are around 10,000 of them, according to rights activists[7]. Some were even found in unnamed and unmarked mass graves by families, who discovered their civilian relatives had been passed off as rebels, killed and then buried covertly. India has never tried to officially reopen the graves to discover who is buried inside, despite calls from activists and global rights watchdogs. In the Kashmir context, some of the influential Indian news channels re-frame 'forcibly disappeared' as 'missing'. Significantly, if someone is 'missing,' the state forces are simply absolved of any crime. By continuously dubbing these people 'missing' despite circumstantial and concrete evidence against the state, culpability on the part of the power that 'disappeared' a person is removed.

Pro-independence or pro-Pakistan political and armed groups are dubbed 'separatists' or 'terrorists' by Indian media. By definition 'separatists' are those[8] "who support the separation of a particular area or a group of people from a larger body of a geographical entity, religion or gender" – for example, Spain's Catalan or Basque separatists. Or, the now-defeated Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. However, in Kashmir, the pro-independence or pro-Pakistan groups object to being framed as 'separatists.' They do not see Kashmir as part of India. They compare their struggle to the one of occupied Palestine. The Palestinians don't see their struggle as a 'separatist' one either, and hence are not called 'Palestinian separatists' by impartial press.

Indian media define pro-Indian politicians as 'mainstream politicians.' The sole idea is to give them legitimacy and power, as by definition mainstream means something that is widespread. In Kashmir, it is the

[8] https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/separatist

pro-Independence movement which is widespread. But, Indian channels would never call that ideology a 'mainstream' movement.

The industrialised semantics and clichés on Kashmir go on and on. Fed regularly by government press statements, there are many statist abstractions that hoodwink even the shrewdest of journalists operating in Kashmir. For example, Indian media and state officials often refer to areas dominated by rebels or militants as 'terrorist-infested' villages or towns. With this, the state's usage of 'infest' seeks to compare the rebels to things that infest, like insects or parasites that spread infection. The conscious and subconscious mind is thus forced to liken the otherwise popular rebels with vile parasites. The fact remains, however, that a rebel fighter killed in a gun battle with Indian troops gets a hero's funeral back home, and such funerals are widely reported by local media. These funerals are, predictably, largely ignored by the dominant Indian media.

Another overused word is 'jawan.' The word (both singular and plural) is used by Indian English media and government to refer to an Indian soldier or soldiers fighting in Kashmir. 'Jawan' is an Urdu word meaning young or youth. Therefore, the word immediately invokes in the mind the adolescence of the soldier. The soldier may have committed a crime while on duty, yet his misconducts could be easily forgiven or dismissed as youthful exuberance. My old employer *Tehelka*, an Indian news magazine, would insert 'jawan' in several of my stories; I never used the word in my text. I am content with less embellishing terms like 'soldier' or 'army man' or 'trooper'.

Kashmiri rebels are always 'heavily-armed' in Indian media stories. There have never been more than 500 rebel fighters in Kashmir, especially since 2008 when Kashmiris opted for a non-violent struggle

against India's rule. Most of the rebel fighters have insufficient arms. In fact, the latest batch of rebel fighters had fought with guns snatched or stolen from government forces. Conversely, the dominant media will not tell the audience about the weaponry of the world's third-largest army employed in Kashmir. Rebels are declared 'feared', 'dreaded', and 'notorious' but government soldiers are merely 'jawan,' all young men performing their duty in the most hostile terrain. They are away from their homes and families, and, therefore, deserve sympathy.

In disaster reporting too, Indian media have struggled to report on the matter accurately and objectively. During the 2014 Kashmir floods, a great deal of coverage was given to the efforts of the Indian armed forces in the relief and rescue work, while local efforts got little space in major Indian newspapers and TV channels. Moreover, one news channel went on to claim that a popular pro-resistance leader was rescued by the Indian army. It was not true. No doubt the Indian army helped rescue civilians in some areas; however, the tragedy was turned into a PR exercise for the army by the Indian electronic media. A Reuters study[9] later found the Indian media's reporting was "overwhelmingly" in favour of the armed forces, promoting the idea that the armed forces were the only agencies protecting Kashmiris from the floodwaters. Indian media tried to implement the same model in their coverage of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, which failed to yield the desired results after Nepalese trended *#GoHomeIndianMedia* on social platforms against the nationalistic reporting[10] of Indian media.

These are just some examples of why the Indian media faces credibility issues in Kashmir, fittingly a "graveyard of reputations." Kashmir

[9] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/media-propaganda-and-kashmir-dispute-case-study-kashmir-floods
[10] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/150506143714012.html

coverage still drives their TRPs, a tool used to judge which television programme is viewed the most, and brings revenue in the form of advertisements, so it promises to be a longstanding issue. Unfortunately, their language has also seeped deep into some Kashmiri media vocabulary. At the same time, many of the local Kashmiri newspapers are yet to formulate a proper news style or written editorial policy so that a reporter's choice of wording is examined. The idea should not be only to get stories out, but also to avoid dehumanising language and people.

Social Media Revolution

It was in 2008 when Indian TV channels played an audiotape with a conversation between two Kashmiri men. The anchors screamed that the ongoing anti-New Delhi protests were being influenced by "Pakistani agents" and their sole evidence was the tape their channels aired. The conversation was in the Kashmiri language; Indian media expressly mistranslated it.

The same day someone else uploaded the same tape on YouTube with the precise and exact translation in English. It turned out that the two men in the video, fruit traders, had been speaking about the situation and what might happen if their apples were not traded on time. The counter-video went viral. Indian media were forced to pull down their "exclusive" stuff from YouTube, so, in the end, one anonymous user had cowed the overwhelming Indian media establishment.

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8X_2sBDpM4

Another "exclusive" video aired in 2017 by TV channel *India Today* is relevant here. It showed a Kashmiri boy 'confessing' to Indian soldiers that he was paid by pro-Pakistan political groups to pelt small stones on government soldiers. *India Today* wanted to demonstrate that the 2017 protests were not part of an indigenous movement. The next day, another video appeared on social media. The same boy, although grown-up, appeared in a video saying *India Today* had aired a video that was shot in 2008[11]. *India Today* never apologised to its audience for passing off the old video as a recent one and unnecessarily risking the life of the teenager.

It was in 2008 when the narrative war on Kashmir entered the cyber world. Smartphones became common, and the internet was readily available. As a result, a technologically savvy generation of Kashmiri youth began to offer strong resistance to the government and dominant Indian media. Thousands of videos were uploaded on social media. Kashmiris had found their own voice, and they no longer required local or Indian media to tell their stories. The phenomenon typified an emerging trend amongst Kashmiri youth of being disgruntled with the Indian media and using technology as a solution. Kashmir's own electronic intifada, a term commonly used in the Palestine context and is Arabic for uprising, this version did not need anything more than a few mobile phones equipped with video recorders and internet connections to help upload the videos of Kashmiri protests on social media.

I remember interviewing a young Kashmiri 'internet warrior' in 2008, who called his videos "the struggle, digitized," adding "Our battle is fought on two fronts. In the streets between unarmed protestors and the [Indian] troops, and on the internet by the youth." The young, tech-savvy 'netizens' of Kashmir were able to record the everyday events in Kashmir and upload them to provide instant updates of the developing

stories in Kashmir. The videos might often appear to be amateurish, but they do serve the purpose of bringing the Kashmir protests to global news outlets and internet users. They have benefitted the media – local, Indian and global – as well, with news from Kashmir readily coming to them. Social media has proven to be a game-changer, especially against the dominant, statist, and incessant narrative beamed on Indian corporate media. It has also democratised the media and helped add nuance to the stories often ignored or deliberately circumvented by the establishment.

However, this is precisely the same phenomenon that has led Indian authorities to increasingly choke internet services in Kashmir in hopes of regulating the narrative. While Facebook increasingly blocks or removes Kashmir related posts, which it finds "violating community guidelines", Twitter has also come under fire of late for bowing to India's pressure. A recent study by the media watchdog, Committee to Protect Journalists[12], revealed that Twitter removed nearly one million tweets since 2017 and that India was using "opaque legal process to suppress Kashmiri journalism, commentary on Twitter." It was discovered that more accounts were withheld in India in the second half of 2018 than in the rest of the world combined.

Data shows India shut down the internet in Kashmir almost 100 times[13] between 2012 to 2018. The ongoing internet shutdown has already crossed the 190-day mark, the longest-ever anywhere in the world. For journalists, Indian authorities have reserved a "media centre" in the main city of Srinagar where journalists are offered a brief and

[12] https://cpj.org/blog/2019/10/india-opaque-legal-process-suppress-kashmir-twitter.php
[13] https://www.medianama.com/2018/08/223-internet-shutdown-jammu-kashmir-independence-day-2018/
[14] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-kashmiri-journalists-protest-100-days-of-internet-ban/1643735

well-monitored period of internet access for sharing stories with their outside bureaus. Parvaiz Bukhari, a senior journalist, said that[14] "Journalists have to punch in their details that are noted down by policemen. Then they have to wait in queue for their turn. They are allowed a short time at one of the ten computer systems. Journalists need to read and connect with their sources, which is not possible at such a restricted place." Notably, some local Kashmiri journalists even jokingly say that they would potentially be better off in a place like Hong Kong, where protests occur under tremendous Chinese surveillance but without an internet gag.

Covering Conflicts

Kashmir is the world's most-militarised zone, and also remains the oldest dispute at the UN[15]. It has seen three wars between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan, and grinding asymmetric warfare has continued since 1989. Yet, Kashmir's is still often dubbed a "forgotten conflict."[16] It does not get the same global coverage received by other international conflicts. That is why most of the coverage has been dominated by Indian media, with all its various skews and slants. Local Kashmiri media too has its own shortcomings; it relies heavily on Indian government advertisements and the often-curtailed internet to sustain. However, the area is still a gold mine for interesting stories. Based on my experience, here is how one should cover any intractable conflict like Kashmir:

[15] https://web.archive.org/web/20200922105157/http://pakistanmission-un.org/?page_id=497
[16] https://web.archive.org/web/20180802090052/https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/kashmirtheforgottenconflict/default.html

1. Understand the region and people's histories. Do a conflict assessment; understand it and its underlying causes. 'Parachute journalists' often end up writing superficial stories. Before you go to report a conflict, educate yourself about the players involved and their goals.

2. A journalist's story from a conflict zone can often become the only information accessible to an outside audience. Hence, it becomes important the story is accurately framed. Framing is important. It includes the usage of the right vocabulary and structuring. It includes finding facts. Facts can come from all sides and sources. So, confirm and re-confirm details. It can intensify the fighting or cool down tempers.

3. Empathise, and build rapport based on trust. I've seen widows of the Kashmir conflict often complain "you're not the first one to interview us. And the last one made several promises of compensation and justice before getting our interviews."

4. Adopt objectivity but don't gratuitously veer into neutrality. Get all sides, and accurately reflect where any consensus lies. Report truth but also acknowledge opposing views. Your report has to be reliable and authoritative. Be ready for rebuttals and address them quickly.

5. Avoid clichés like you 'avoid the plague'. Clichés are words or phrases that have been overused – so much so that they are no longer stimulating or effective. Yes, 'conflict-torn Syria' is a cliché.

6. Get the story, alive. A dead reporter tells no story. Take Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (or HEFAT) courses. The programme helps you report safely in a challenging environment while refining your self-defence and first-aid abilities.

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In this book, some of TRT World's finest journalists, correspondents, newsmakers, and producers have outlined their experiences in various war zones and conflict areas. These insights are significant not just to understand the journalistic craft but also to grasp the complexities facing journalists as they report the stories. Through their narrator role, the journalist becomes part of the story. He/she defines what is at stake for the audience and frames the contours of the conflict at hand. Therefore, the various chapters of this book not only contribute to the existing literature on war reporting but also help us comprehend the multiple obstacles, internal and external, that accompany war reporting.

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