

THE MIDDLE EAST RENDEZVOUS

An Initiative by the Centre for Middle East Studies



ANALOGIES FROM THE FRONTLINES

BBC and CNN show one dimension, but the Arabic reporters or local stringers provide another dimension to the conflict

In Conversation with Dr Wael Awwad

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The Middle East Rendezvous aims to engage with great minds on topics of contemporary relevance to the Middle East. It hopes to bring out arguments and conversations that can constructively build towards the Centre for Middle East Studies' goal, i.e. Promoting Peace Through Dialogue. In this edition, CMES interviews Dr Waiel Awwad a conflict journalist and political commentator. The conversation below reveals complexities of a conflict journalist and the dynamics of reporting from war zones in Middle East.

You have reported from multiple conflicts, and non-conflict zones in the Middle East in the capacity of a conflict journalist and investigative reporter; How different is conflict journalism from other forms of journalism?

Each medium of the news--broadcast, print, and digital reporting from and on conflict zones has varied challenges. Print journalists watch from afar, and print media journalists can sit in the bunker and report. As a television (TV) journalist, I report from the spot and from the nearest point of the incident to capture the up-close visuals of the conflict.

If you do not have visual reports and images, I, as a journalist, do not have a story to give the people. That is why TV reporters are in the frontline and closer to the conflict zone to gain visuals. TV reporting has to provide the audience with a picture, video, and audio to analyse and judge what is happening on the ground.

Thus, TV journalists are vulnerable because of the possibility of sniper attack, shootout, and debris injury as they report in open spaces. Death among journalists in conflict zones has increased in the last decade due to negligence and inadequate training and abduction and targeting of journalists in conflict zones. The self-safety of the journalist reporting from the conflict zone is vital and must be ensured. It is tough to report from the ground. Journalists' safety equipment and personal protection are imperative, and TV news channels editors can wait.



Do journalism degrees and their curriculums prepare journalists to report from the front lines of conflict zones?

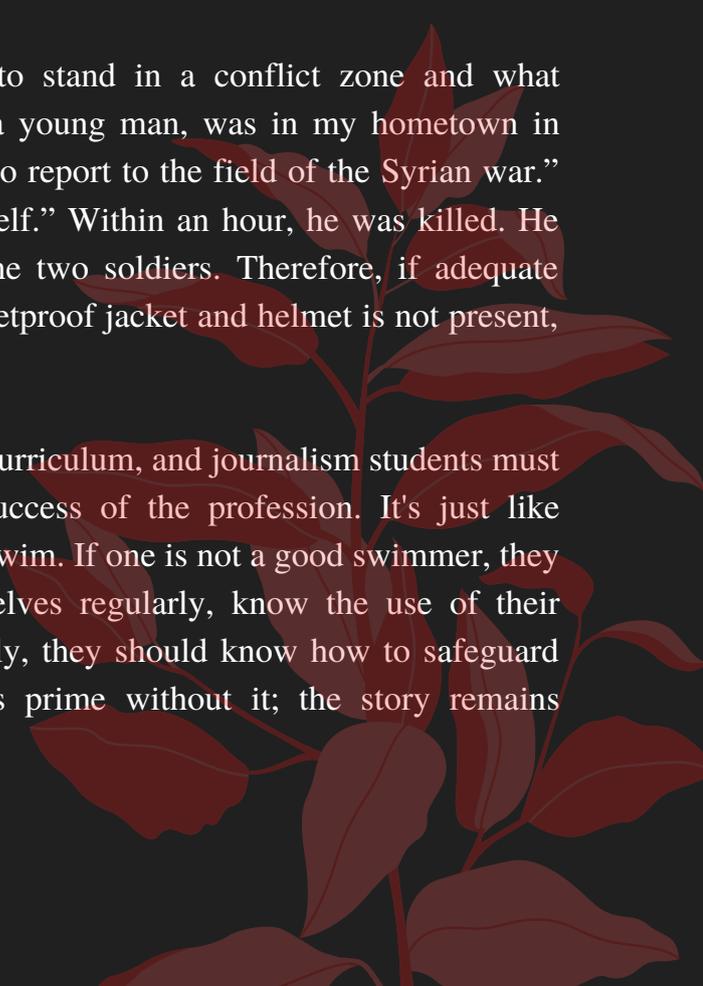
Any profession and its study must have a good curriculum. I don't entirely know what journalism schools are teaching. However, journalism is a dynamic profession, and many things have changed. The advent of social media—citizen journalists and bloggers—have made the profession of journalism and reporting irrelevant. Moreover, because of financial crunch, news-media houses fail to send a reporter on the ground, and if they send, they are under-equipped and lack training. So, unless, and until one has studied journalism in all its aspects, conflict reporting is a difficult task.

Journalism curriculum should prepare one to be analytical and adaptive to new changes in the field and the profession itself. I used to travel to Jaffna, and I used to carry bags and equipment like lights, microphone, camera but now I report, edit, and send dispatches using the mobile-phone. The curriculum must prepare the student to respond to new technological changes without hindering the ethics of journalism.

Examinations are not tools to test the progress of the training of conflict journalists. Many novice conflict journalists enter the field without adequate training, which is why the rate of death is on the rise in this profession. In my experience as a reporter from the war zone, I have noticed that many people lack even the most basic training; only certain international agencies and journalists follow strict protocols and training learning and guidelines.

Rookie conflict journalist does not know how to stand in a conflict zone and what precautions to be taken. One of my colleagues, a young man, was in my hometown in Syria. I was in India, and he told me, "I'm going to report to the field of the Syrian war." My response to him was, "just take care of yourself." Within an hour, he was killed. He was killed with a sniper. He was too close to the two soldiers. Therefore, if adequate training on protection and protection kit like a bulletproof jacket and helmet is not present, one becomes an easy target.

These are the issues that must be addressed in the curriculum, and journalism students must take them seriously. Otherwise, it affects the success of the profession. It's just like throwing somebody in the sea and telling them to swim. If one is not a good swimmer, they will drown. The journalist has to update themselves regularly, know the use of their equipment, and tell a good story. Most importantly, they should know how to safeguard themselves in the situation of danger. Safety is prime without it; the story remains incomplete.



Is there any story you did as a conflict reporter where you felt, 'thank god I'm a journalist' and sensed to have done the journalistic duty—holding truth to power and giving a voice to the voiceless?

I have a lot to tell, and this interview shall not be enough for that; hence, I'm writing my book on the Iraq war. I'm already in the process of finishing it. The book is challenging to write as covering the Iraq War was a traumatic experience. As a good reporter, telling the truth is vital in a conflict zone. I was reporting the American invasion and was embedded and protected by American troops. However, I was captured by Iraqi government forces and was taken into captivity and was surrounded by freedom fighters and suicide bombers. The Iraqi troops believed that I was a foreigner because I looked and dressed like an American and was with American people. They assumed I was a spy. I only had my language and dialect to prove my identity. To my luck, my captivators recognized me on the TV channel.

One of the generals who captured me saw my confiscated tapes and realized I had scathingly questioned the American forces on the ill-treatment of Iraqi prisoners of wars by American troops. They understood I was professionally handling my duty as a journalist. Therefore, my reporting and Arabic identity saved me from instant killing and delayed the decision for hanging us as per the order of president Saddam Hussien and we managed to escape from captivity

Similarly, I was also detained in Afghanistan. It was during a time when two Arabs ,Al Qaeda terrorists , who faked their identity as journalists and killed the Afghan leader Ahmad Shah Masoud , I was imprisoned there in the same compound he was assassinated , but I was able to come out with intervention of the foreign minister Dr. Abdulla Abdulla who told his men I am his guest. But I faced difficulties while reporting once they knew I am an Arab.

When I was near Khyber, I encountered a young man with an AK47 who wanted to kill me or take me as a hostage. I started having a conversation with him; he asked me if I was an Arab; I responded positively. He said you are like Osam Arab, Taliban, I responded, saying no. Then I asked him if he is a Muslim and if he liked to go pilgrimage to perform Hajj in Saudi Arabia j. He replied affirmatively. I was having this conversation in Persian; in his language, I asked him but Mecca is in Saudi Arabia and Bin Laden is from Saudi Arabia. Would you still go to Hajj.? He then looked at me angrily and told me to move away and let me go free. This was only possible because of the presence of mind, linguistic and cultural sensitivity, which a conflict journalist ought to have; people in a conflict zone are mentally fragile, and being sensitive towards them helps the reporter and the people.

The few Arab journalists who know the region are often undermined by the mainstream discourse of the English and Western media. Arab journalists who understand the language, culture, public sentiment, and the region as a whole are required for a holistic and indigenous understanding of the on-ground situation. How should the problem of Western hegemony in the space of media and conflict zones be resolved?

Western hegemony is there because the corporate houses are part of the major news agencies in all formats and mediums. They have their agenda and ambitions to fulfil just like colonists. When the colonial country has their troops on the ground, definitely the reporter (western) will come and report a good story of how they are saving humanity in the region. These reporters do not highlight the role of bad soldiers in disturbing harmony in a fragile area. The audience should know and understand these biases and prejudices. I remember this reporter standing beside an American soldier in Tora Bora, Afghanistan; he knows his audience and portrayed a malign picture of the situation, which benefited their narrative using nationalism.

But the monopoly of the western media is broken. For instance, Arabic reporters understand the cultural, socio-political, and economic factors that impact a conflict; one reporter was sitting on the Kabul desk for an Arabic channel for three years and understood the trends that America would invade. He stayed there and was one of the first journalists to break the story from the ground.

BBC and CNN show one dimension, but the Arabic reporters or local stringers provide another dimension to the conflict. I saw the might of American forces and how they do not differentiate between civilian and military targets. There is a lot of collateral damage, and it needs to be analyzed from multiple perspectives to gather the facts.

We need to focus on the local reporters who are empowered by the power of social media and they prevent big corporate news channels from manipulating the news cycle. But at the same time the problem of fake news is rampant. A reporter must present the facts and not be succumbed by the corporate houses. A reporter must know the culture of the people and some local contacts. This will ensure a strategy that can prepare the reporter to assimilate in new-terrains.

Conflict journalists see infrastructure damage, broken families, blood, violence, and loss of life; how do they remain objective in this situation and not get carried away while reporting?

It is difficult and emotional when you report for a country with which you have a blood relation. And yes, remaining objective is a challenge. Thus, being balanced is not always possible.

But a journalist has to be calm and composed. Some of us would get paid for not reporting the injuries of the American soldier so that the sentiment and morale can be maintained in American and the parents of the soldiers. The stories are often spun in a manner that caters the emotions of different biases.

Maintaining the balance is tricky as you feel emotions. I felt it in Iraq. I felt it in Yemen. I felt it even in Syria. I am not here because I have a set agenda or story; I have to be factual and truthful. I was in Iraq, and my channel was trying to modify the sentiment of the Arab locals, and the public opinion was different, and I refused to do that stating that I reports facts and not false emotions . A journalist has to have the quest and drive for the truth, and editors often might not publish your story, but you have to keep reporting the facts. This subject of objectivity and emotions is an important topic and cannot be fully answered.

You mentioned that you were stationed in Syria and Yemen, can you tell us about the time-period you were stationed there and your experience?

Syria had a lot of fake news. For instance, Arabic channels would pay bloggers, locals, and school children so that they would conduct demonstrations against the regime and the channel would capture the visuals and report accordingly. Many reporters would bribe young boys and ask them to hold placards. Thus, fake news is created, and a public narrative is built. After that, what can anyone do? Academia has pointed out the issue of fake news, but it is limited to the ones interested and the universities.

I have seen how reporters have staged violence using children who are injured and lying on the floor full of blood beside a coffin to show that the government is trying to kill and slaughter its people. But later, on YouTube, you see those children working and alive. The audience would see CNN, BBC, Al Arabiya, and Al Jazeera and think this report from a reputed source must be true. A lot of it is fake and adulterated news.

Another example is that of a girl in Syria, she was reported missing, and TV channels say that some bones were found and her body was chopped and killed by the government. Two months later, the girl was found and interviewed by Syrian TV. She had run away with her boyfriend as her parents were forcing her to marry. Not a single channel that reported the previous story neither corrected their reporting nor followed up on the same. Investigation and follow up on the previous story is a must to bring out accurate and authentic information.

Fake narratives destroy a country and its people. The UN's investigative team and researchers found out that 2 million are starving to death in Yemen. These 2 million were invisible for the past five years? The war is ravaging the country, which amongst the poorest of the poor in the world.

To solve the conflict, sea, land, and air routes of transportation and travel were blocked. How does the hungry and injured get aid then? Stopping the war can only save life in Yemen.

Nobody wants to report this story as most of them want to portray the western set-up of regime change which helps in aiding the American and Western interests. These are the issues where nobody wants you to report because there is a set-up of regime change policy, which they have set up.

It is a known secret that the United States wants to topple seven regimes—the former General of US Armed Forces Wesley Clark's memoir suggests that another war is part of a long-planned Department of Defense strategy that anticipated “regime change” by force in no fewer than seven countries in the Middle East which includes Syria, Somalia, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Libya. What I or my other colleagues report would be immaterial as nobody is listening to the truth. The corporate invaders, war machines, and the arms industry would benefit from a regime change as their demand would increase, and the arms industry can flourish. They show what ISIS and Al Qaeda terrorist organisations have done and show the violence and create Islamophobia. However, the reportage forgets that Arabic and local Muslim women, men, and children have lost their lives. One hundred three countries and their 173,000 mercenaries from all over the world have created instability. The war must stop by stopping intervention.

The West does talk about democracy in Myanmar, Taiwan or Hong Kong. But no talk on slaughtering of 500,000 children of Iraq, 500 Syrian children, and 1 million of Yemen and Libya. The answer lies in the politics of the situation. The media is run by these giants with eventual control over what and how it shows to the audience.

Your physical and mental safety is always at threat while reporting from a conflict zone did that ever make you question your choice of being a journalist?

I forget about my children, family, wife, and home when I am in the conflict zone. I was young full of passion and fire and with a gush to tell stories from the ground. After I was captivated and questions of whether it is worth the risk often came to my mind. CNN, while interviewing me, asked whether I would go back into the field after being captured. I promptly replied, “yes.” Journalism and reporting is my profession, I will go again, but I will be far more cautious and alert from the last time. The emotional and psychological impact is powerful. I have been shot in Jaffna and captivated multiple times. At that moment, I think about my family and why I left them behind.

The only way I think this problem can be solved is by conversation. On the field, reporters must inform their whereabouts some trusted locals or their editors. Reporters should also document and archive everything they see and observe. This repository might come in handy for a rescue mission or future reference.

The journalists have to keep their mental strengths high and seek professional help if needed to help with post-traumatic stress. Instead, depending upon substance abuse and drugs or alcohol, professional treatment for the psychological impact will help the journalist gain their strength and side and revive life back to normal.

Since I am a doctor and I studied yoga in India, I understood the bodily and mental changes I was going through. I was also prepared for the worst after-effects of my job, and that acceptance gave me the strength to work and revive. I also had faith in God, and I would pray and thank him for saving my life. I have survived death and captivity multiple times in various locations, and it is emotionally straining. However, the affection and love from my family and friends help me tackle it effectively. I am also not that young anymore with the same drive, but my passion for telling stories drives me even today to report to my audience with honesty and accuracy of facts.

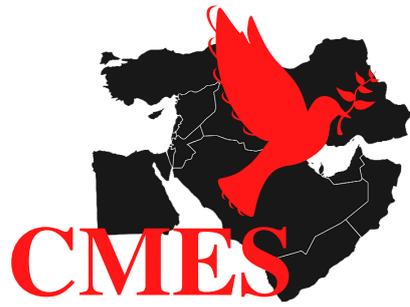
What impact does social media have on reporting news from conflict zones? Is it a boon or bane?

Social media has its pros and cons. It is a double-edged sword. It can be an asset and a nuisance. It ultimately depends on your usage of social media. Moreover, social media is a new way of reporting and communicating and poses a challenge to the traditional ways of journalism. It also houses fake news, and it becomes difficult to segregate. It is a tool that widens knowledge and sources of information for journalists, students, and researchers.

Social media and digital sources help me enhance my reporting because I can deduce the backstory and validate reports' accuracy. Due to the short duration of time and immediate consumption of information, news on social media lacks analytical thought and reporting. The thirst for trends and followers causes this less analytical news.

However, it helps in providing news information from the group quickly in a concise manner. There are vast areas of fake news, and it is a challenge that we must overcome. For instance, Indian journalists covering Damascus believed that streets are being destroyed, and widespread demonstrations occur. Nevertheless, in reality, the roads were, according to them, like “the streets of Kolkata.” Social media should be used, but it must uphold journalistic drive and ethics.

*Interview conducted by Naman Vakharia
Junior Coordinator at CMES*



**The Centre for Middle East Studies
Jindal School of International Affairs
O.P. Jindal Global University**

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