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"I am not a foreign journalist who's in Syria for a short trip to do some reporting before heading back home. This is my home, and I should force these people to accept who I am. I should once again fight the same battle I had fought as a teenager this time with strange armed men in a chaotic corner of my country. Known as the most dangerous area in the entire world for journalists."

Welcome to the Media at Risk podcast. Those were the words of award-winning Syrian journalist and human rights activist Zaina Erhaim, taken from her latest essay on what it was like to cover the war at home.

My name is Natacha Yazbeck and I'm a doctoral candidate here at the Annenberg School for Communication.

Today we turn our conversation to Syria.

We'll be talking about freedom, fear, and identity with Zaina .

And I'll let her introduce herself.

I'm a Syrian journalist.

I'm currently a refugee in the UK and I work as a communication manager with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

I lived most of my life in Syria, and when the uprising started and then the war started, I was still living in Syria until 2016 where I was forced to go into displacement in Turkey and then eventually in the UK.

So your experience in Syria far predates the Syrian war, and your experience in the war is unique in that you stayed there so long and you were so close to the front lines.

Tell us a little bit about life before the war.

Um, Syria before the war, as I think many of its parts now were very much closed.

The regime propaganda was the only thing that was available.

Only the state media was allowed to, um, to be active and even when we had a private sector, they were very much close to the regime or related to it, and they were not allowed to get out of the main lines.

Everything was so restricted we were raised to be afraid of each other, of strangers of foreigners, only believed what the regime wants us to believe, and we also believe that walls had ears, so we shouldn't be saying anything to anyone, otherwise the security forces would take revenge.

Being detained in the Syrian context means like being dead until further notice.

Was there a moment when you became aware of the centrality of fear and survival before you became aware of the spoken or the written word as a form of resistance to that as a journalist? At that year I was 12 years old, and I think I heard my dad or someone else speaking about Hafez al-Assad, who is the father of the current president.

I'm speaking about the violations or the massacres that he has committed and I decided that I hate him.

And I made a mistake and I mentioned that loudly in front of my mom and that was the first time ever and the last time where she actually slapped me saying this is not true we all love him and uh you can't even dare to say that at your school and I know in many cases some some teachers even ask the children in the class trying to get some information from them, especially the Futui teacher which is like the military related teacher that we had.

She would ask the kids, and I'm speaking like elementary school, so you're like Hafez, what are you hearing? Is your parents um are pro the government so they were actually trying to use the kids to know which families or which people are tempted or at least have an intention to oppose the regime.

And that, as you can imagine, has a huge consequences which will lead for the family to be arrested because the kid just said something.

And everything was very much sourced and propaganda to make us to force us to go into one direction and if you don't go in that direction, the punishment and the consequences are very dangerous.

So we were walking, as we call it in Arabic, on the edge of a sword.

So when we finally had the chance to break it up, we broke it up and then you find everyone holding a camera and everyone is turning.

One of the girls, kaya, who was eventually executed by Hassan, yeah, and, and Raqqa, she she can't even, she didn't even call herself a journalist.

All what she was doing is just writing what is happening in her hometown and another on her Facebook.

There are many others who are doing that.

There are news providers.

They're providing content that no one else has an access to to have that content.

Just because they know what it means not to be able to gain any kind of information and to live in a complete um it it was a prison, it was a prison when only some food and some basics were leaking in but you're not allowed to see the sky you're not allowed to see what is life and how is life beyond those bars so I think knowing that is the main motivation.

To try to break it in all the ways possible.

You're describing a model of journalism that wasn't recognized as journalism, not only by news organizations and not only because Facebook, for example, was the platform of publication.

It wasn't recognized as journalism by the very people doing the journalism, what we would call on the ground reporting.

But that changed fundamentally drastically over the course of the Syrian war.

So today, Syrians are the day to day reporters on the ground for some of the biggest news organizations in the world.

They report in Arabic, English, and images and video, and yet there is still such a lack of public awareness and frankly a lack of compensation for their work.

Now this strikes a chord close to my heart as it's what I'm working on as a researcher.

But it's also something that you've been exceptionally vocal about.

You've worked for the BBC, you've produced stories on your own out of Syria.

You've helped news groups procure and train strangers.

What is it like for a Syrian journalist reporting for one of these lead news organizations from inside Syria today? I think the general case is disappointment.

I can't even think of one organization.

Which were encouraged or hired people on the ground and provide them with all the rights that they're giving to the international staff, even those who are really doing great work, but when it comes to the locals, they just stop and the best case scenarios they avoid to hire locals so they don't have responsibilities in the worst case scenarios they just take them as consultants so they're inside but they're outside.

Uh, they're with us, but they don't have any rights, any pensions, any health insurance, but sadly, I can't think of one good example.

And how do you respond to, we hear this a lot, it's for their own protection, that there's no paperwork involved, that their bylines are not showing up, to which we've always responded, give them a pen name.

Or ask them Ask them whether they are ready to risk.

Their name to be put there or they don't, I think and assuming that you know better about them is very much annoying.

They are there, they know the risks, they understand the circumstances.

If they say they don't mind for their full name to be there, you don't put it.

If they think that it's fine, you put it.

I think it is that simple.

It depends on the story, on the circumstances.

I know a journalist in Damascus who is still doing stories.

She's not registered with the government, which makes her in a very critical position.

She has been writing in a fake name for the last 3 or 4 years, but then she said, like, I don't have a record.

I don't have a portfolio.

I want to have it.

So she started writing with her full name now.

Surely different stories and different topics mainly culture and um things that are related to everyday life.

She took a decision and she is dealing with the consequences, but forcing her to put or to remove her name is it's like a very annoying decision to be taken without her consultation because it strips you of any power or agency completely.

It does.

At the same time, it, it, it has an indication that because we're in this prestigious position, we have the right to decide on your behalf, and you're the one on the ground and you're the one who knows the risks and the circumstances far better than we do.

I worked with BBC Arabic for one year but I was mainly working in the newsroom so I didn't have um that much interactions but my main um interaction with the organizations who are working in Syria and the international journalists was when I went back and I started working for the IWPR I was then trying to help the citizen journalist that I'm training and my friends and my colleagues to get published, to get noticed, to be in the international media.

So I was really working 24 hours free of charge fixer connecting them with international media.

But I found it very difficult to follow up and cope with the kind of complaints that I kept getting.

Once I even posted something like whom from my friends, if they had the ability, would sue an international media outlet or a journalist, and more than 30 media activists commented saying, sharing their stories.

He took my pictures without my permission and then I wasn't credited.

She used a footage and she told me she's gonna pay me back and she hasn't.

They used two of these three ideas that I suggested on them and they haven't credited me and so and so and this is just in in one piece of Syria and this is one piece of the country.

And that's not just dangerous because you're taking advantage of uh vulnerable people who don't have rights and they don't have a system that they can raise their complaint to, but just telling me because they think I have the backup of an organization and I can help them and I couldn't, but it's also very dangerous because it harmed all the other international dedicated journalists who are planning to cover because it really breaks the trust between the two.

And it makes them feel like all the international journalists who are coming are going to be fooling us, so this is the general concept.

And only after 4 or 5 years of this incident, then the locals started demanding contracts, but they didn't even know what contract is because we in the Arab world and mainly we don't deal with contracts.

Our contracts is our word and because they were not demanding that they didn't know that they had rights and they lost it and they learned it in the very hard way.

So when I felt really frustrated, I told them, why don't you name and shame? If we can't do anything else, just name and shame.

And many of them were scared like, but maybe we want to work with that agency or maybe that journalist could help us out working with those people.

So they are more powerful.

Maybe they, if we want if we go to Turkey or to Europe, they can actually took us to trial, but they're very vulnerable.

They're already living in a war zone.

They don't have any rights.

They hardly make payments for their families.

They don't have any kind of insurance.

They're not backed up and then above all that being used, so you can imagine how vulnerable they feel, how weak they are.

So none of them agreed to name and shame.

Would you have name and shamed if you were still in there working? I would, you would, I would.

And that's why I'm hated by many of the international groups and by the UN as well.

So now you live in a safe, unquote space.

Tell me about what it feels like to be safe.

I'm using air quotes.

Um, I don't think I will ever feel safe.

Well, first I'm a refugee, so that indicates that I'm a pending citizen.

That means I'm not completely stable.

I'm still on a shaking ground.

Papers are still a nightmare for me.

I'm always scared that I'm gonna be losing my travel document.

I'm always scared that I will be losing my residency.

Laws would change, I would be kicked out, I'll be deported.

I'll be arrested for something that I don't know.

So despite the fact that um I have my full guaranteed asylum beside the visas, besides not being able to travel to Turkey to see my family or whatever, not to mention uh the security of my family who might be deported back to Syria because they don't have a paper.

I physically I'm not, I don't expect to uh to find a bomb on my door as I was before.

But mentally, um, I don't know what safe is.

I think I've I've never felt it, and I wouldn't know if I feel it because I've I've never felt it before.

And just to comment about naming and shaming, I started naming and shaming those organizations who invites mom to speak without paying for babysitting fees.

So on that topic on motherhood and specifically gender, you've written a lot about gender in journalism as well as gender in Syrian society, and it was actually your writings that stood out to me because I've always taken the abaya or the hijab when I have to wear it as you know, this is part of the story.

This is how I get access to something that's so important.

It's just part of the work.

And you've talked publicly, not only as a Syrian, but as a journalist, that this is something we need to think more critically about and not accept blindly, and that's a rare point to raise.

So you've written an essay recently entitled Herma, which is something of a charged word in Arabic.

Explain to us a little bit about that word.

Herma Herma is a word that is still being used in in my conservative community, um, so it's sadly, um, still a term to describe.

Dependent women who are good enough coats codes uh to be good daughters, good wives, bring up children and die, and as the proverb says in Arabic, the good woman is the one who moves from her family's house, husband's house to grave.

So this is really the life circle for the Herma.

It also implicates uh that she doesn't have an opinion.

She wouldn't do anything against the traditions, the community, the patriotic society she lives at the struggle I had in those latest years where the extremists start to spread in northwest Syria.

Is that I was moving between the Hema and myself every couple of months when I'm inside, I was forcing myself to be Herma from outside and in my actions, low voice, no mixing with men, putting a huge amount of distance between me and anyone else, monitoring what I'm saying, monitoring my voice, where I'm moving and and when.

And then I go out and I suddenly become myself.

I take off my conservative clothes, listen to loud music, go and dance and drink.

So moving from this schizophrenic kind of situation and living in the schizophrenic kind of situation in two years, and then you lost it like inside, although I was Herma, but I felt like I'm doing what I love to do and I am in the place that I belong among the people that.

I consider like my comrades and fellows and people and outside I am myself, but I don't have that cause and I'm not with the people that I want to be.

So I was lost inside and outside.

So it's like you're always you, but you're never fully you.

It is in the best cases there was a part missing, and I'm, I'm certainly not close to think or to be considered as Herma for anyone, even like inside when following all the rules of her Herma.

I was clearly far from being one.

Did that trigger any online backlash against your critique of the idea of Hema, not only as a Syrian woman, but the journalistic acceptance of putting on the veil to go do your story? It triggered mainly the Syrians who think that this is a very minor topic Western-like kind of thing that I am speaking about just to gain appraisals from the West and God knows what West means in that context, criticizing that community or even shedding a light about it.

Is something that's not expected.

I even got criticism like why did you write it in English? So they don't want only to control the context and my personal testimony, but also the language that I'm I'm I'm sharing my story with.

You write in English only because you wanna reach the Western audience.

Maybe you're after um a new award or to be famous, so that's why you're using your own communities to gain that while those women international journalists go to the same areas that you're at, but instead of criticizing the communities they highlight the misery and the bombing and the bad humanitarranean situation.

I was like this is exactly what it is.

I am from here.

I belong.

I care about the community and I want to highlight those issues so we can speak about them highlight them and solve those unfair, obviously unfair issues.

If I'm a westerner, I'm here getting the story.

Getting whatever I'm here for and then get out.

But yeah it was it was harsh.

I, I didn't respond to the comments, but many of them were mainly um some of them even challenged the the things that I wrote, which is like a personal experience saying no this has never happened as if it's impossible in our communities to force girls to wear a headscarf, but the general term is that this is not important.

People are getting killed so when you're speaking about being forced to wear a headscarf, this is very minor.

Just one thing, I don't think that it's not important to speak to the Western audience, and that's why I participated in that chapter.

So I wanted to say or to tell them what does it mean to be a woman reporter covering our war because all the perspectives, all the books that are published by international researchers or journalists about Syria are told from their own outsider's eyes without really giving that perspectives of the story.

Well, what has changed? You know, you were so dedicated and you're still so dedicated, not just to Syria, but also to journalism, freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

And you've worked with and for news organizations, some of it free of charge.

And now to hear you saying, you know, I'm not necessarily interested in telling these stories, my stories to these audiences outside of home.

What has changed? I'm tired.

I'm not hopeful anymore.

You're not hopeful.

Nope.

How do you feel? I feel tired I feel tired, I think, um, and I would rather keep this tiny energy that is keeping me going to myself and to other things, which is still related to documentation.

It's still related to keeping those stories.

I, I wrote the book in Arabic, but I couldn't find a publisher because I don't think any Arabic publisher would be interested in such a content.

So I'm trying to write it in English, so hopefully, after writing it in English and publishing it, I would get someone who would be interested in Arabic.

OK, let's lay this out.

The stories that you wanted to tell, these are the stories that you didn't tell or couldn't tell when you were working as a professional hired journalist.

You wrote them down in Arabic.

And you don't necessarily want to tell them to an English speaking audience.

However, you cannot get an Arabic publisher to publish them unless and until you write them in English, you get the prestigious English publisher and then they will back translate them to Arabic.

Yes, and I got more than 1415 rejections from Arabic publishing houses on the Arabic manuscripts.

And I got 5 English interested in only the idea.

Without even writing it in English yet.

What does this do to your relationship with the Arabic language and the Arabic speaking world? It doesn't affect it that much, to be frank.

I know this is like if I was writing something precatory for Saudis, I would be able to get it.

It's mainly because it's independent.

It touches on taboos, so I'm not expecting it to be easily accepted by the Arabic court, and I don't care.

But when I finally be able to publish it, I might put it into articles just to make it reach the wider audience.

But only after having this full document just written, printed out of my mind.

Put out there and I want to turn the page.

I want to finish that stage and I think the book is the final stage where I can say I did what I could and I can start over finally.

You did what you could for for Syria, for my country.

And the next chapter will or will not involve.

God knows what, but I hope I can be a bit disattached.

If you could go back.

Would you Do the same? Would you stay? Would you report? Would you continue to help others report even after you leave? I don't know.

I think I thought about that, and I believe.

I told myself whether I can survive more in regime held areas and keep low profile to stay where I always wanted to live at, which is Damascus.

It was my final destination.

So I thought whether I can survive for a year or two, and when I was speaking about that, my friend, the woman journalist who is still in Damascus, I, I felt really I invade her like you could stay, you're still there.

But then I know myself.

I wouldn't keep silence.

I will be coach uh because I am vocal and I'm stubborn and I wouldn't just let go of the violations when I see them and use fake name.

It's just very difficult for me.

So I think even if I was planning for something else, if I go back, everything is gonna be happening exactly the same because I am the same.

Thanks for listening.

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To find out more, visit our website www.ASCmediaisk.org.