

Lebanese Women Journalists Brave War Odds

Lebanese women journalists braved bombs, bullets and missiles to report the conflict between Hizbullah and Israel in the summer of 2006, sometimes surpassing their male colleagues' coverage by providing insight into the conflict's human nature.

Veterans who had covered the country's civil war were joined by newcomers who proved equally resilient against physical dangers and tight controls imposed by "the Party of God," which called most of the media shots in the heat of battle.

"Hizbullah monopolized media coverage, we could only report on their angle of the news," said seasoned reporter Sanaa El Jack, who writes for the pan-Arab daily *Asharq Alawsat* and contributes a weekly column in the leading Lebanese daily *An-Nahar*.

She said journalists were banned from reporting on people complaining about Hizbullah's control over the media in Beirut's southern suburbs, the country's south or wherever the party boasted strongholds that were targeted by Israeli firepower.

“We couldn’t visit refugee shelters, shoot pictures or talk to people unless we were accompanied by a Hizbullah minder,” she said, adding that independent voices were stifled and any contradiction of the “resistance’s” spin was viewed as being pro-Israel.

El Jack, no stranger to wars, is one of dozens of women journalists who covered the recent conflict through hard news stories as well as eloquently crafted features about human tragedies, suffering, and hope in an engaging style that added luster to her newspaper’s war reports.

It is a quality the women journalists brought easily to their work, particularly those who had lived through, and covered, Lebanon’s 15-year civil war that ended in 1990.

Even rookies like Rima Maktabi of Al Arabiya news channel, whose childhood was spent seeking shelter from the civil war and who overcame stereotypes about her earlier career as a TV weather girl and game show host, embraced the challenge with bravery and determination to accurately disseminate the horrors of war.

“We saw death close up,” Maktabi told an interviewer for Lebanon’s *An-Nahar*, adding that her satellite channel obtained more than one exclusive during the 33 days of fierce battles.

She recounted how the convoy she rode in had accompanied a Lebanese Red Cross ambulance in south Lebanon and was targeted by Israeli gunners. As a result, the Red Cross asked the reporters to maintain a healthy distance on the road to prevent relief workers from being attacked by the Israelis.

“We also lived through the Israeli blockade (of Lebanon) and during the last 15 days of the war really felt the hardship of supplies running out in the country,” she recalled.

Maktabi, like other reporters, had to share what few food items she managed to carry with the starving civilians she encountered. Since extra weight could be problematic for TV journalists loaded with heavy equipment on the run, they often limited their supplies to bread and cheese.

She had traded the fashionable clothes she wore on Lebanon’s Future TV for a flak jacket and occasional helmet, knowing full well that the protective gear could easily be penetrated by Israeli missiles.

“We don’t choose the hour of our death,” Maktabi noted with an air of resignation.

Equally determined was Katia Nasser of Al Jazeera, who braved untold dangers to get to the story and make sure the rest of the world knew about it.

Nasser, who volunteered to go to south Lebanon, her ancestral home, kept her fear in check and saved her tears for off-camera moments. She had been itching to leave Al Jazeera's newsroom in Doha where she is an editor and was, fortunately, supported by her superiors who agreed to allow her to cover the story first-hand.

The Lebanese women journalists had no time to worry about their appearance on the air or the luxury of the conflict and safety training on which major Western media spend fortunes to prepare their staffers.

The battlefield, it turned out, was where many of the inexperienced (sometimes previously studio-or newsroom-bound) reporters cut their teeth on war correspondence and the inconveniences of going without food, water, clean clothes, baths, a place to sleep, or even a safe shelter.

Exhaustion also affected on-air delivery, with reporters sometimes fumbling over words or involuntarily showing their fear.

Despite being pleased at the opportunity to tell the story up close and personal, guilt feelings also haunted women reporters whose assignments had them covering battles in various parts of the country and knowing they had left behind women, children and elderly people unable to budge under the relentless shelling.

Nancy Al Saba'a of New TV seemed to disappear from view one day after Israeli rockets rained down on her location on a building's rooftop in the southern suburbs. But she was shown days later running from Israeli warplanes flying perilously low over the same area when she went back to cover the ensuing destruction.

The women journalists capitalized on their gender, which afforded them easier access to shelters where mostly women and children huddled to escape Israel's wrath, and enabled them to disseminate images of the unfolding human tragedy.

Rima Maktabi saw her exposure to war as an enriching experience, adding that getting the story was worth the risk. "In the final stages, cars were banned from circulation so we decided to get out and walk, in defiance of this reality and to fight all efforts to stifle our news coverage. Journalism isn't just a cause or a calling, it's a personal challenge."

As learning experiences go, "Harb Tammouz" (the July War), as the Lebanese called it, was a crash course in combat journalism for countless young women reporters. Their previous studio and fieldwork backgrounds had not prepared them for the magnitude and seriousness of the battle.

They also had to make individual judgments on whether to forge ahead with their coverage or hesitate and pull back for fear of being killed in the line of duty.

Layal Najib was not lucky. The 23-year-old photojournalist for international news agencies and local publications died instantly when an Israeli missile slammed next to a taxi in which she was traveling to the southern village of Qana—scene of an Israeli attack which killed 29 civilians, mostly women and children.

May Abdallah, a young journalist who lived to report on the conflict, opted to cover human-interest stories from her MBC TV vantage point. The former Al Arabiya reporter reverted to the umbrella company's evening newscast because she had married and sought a balance between her work and life at home.

Asked to what extent she would help beleaguered civilians in a war zone, Abdallah told *An-Nahar* newspaper: "Correspondents are human and have feelings, they're not just journalists reporting news, recording interviews and editing footage."

The mother of twin toddlers said journalists had a humanitarian mission and were obligated to help the needy.

The day hostilities ended, Abdallah was stopped in her tracks by a man who had lost his son and daughter and was searching for a few belongings through the rubble of his house.

“He spoke of his son who had asked him if he’d live, to know if he’d pass his intermediate school exams,” she said, adding that the unforgettable scene and others like it made it difficult to hold back tears on her many assignments.

But that did not deter her from pursuing her passion of being a field reporter and her insistence that office “walls don’t teach.”

For their part, older print journalists like El Jack were frustrated that their newspaper editors did not appreciate how the field reporters had suffered to get the story, notably when their predominantly male editors opted for the easy way out and used international news agency copy that reached them faster than their own staffers’ reports.

“How much do foreigners know about the details and nuances of the country?” El Jack asked.

Her earlier experience as a war correspondent was invaluable. No sooner had the Israeli bombing campaign begun, than she and her colleagues tuned in to radio stations that reverted to breaking news modes of yesteryear by providing listeners with instant information on the events.

The journalists’ old reflexes also kicked in automatically. War veterans counted the seconds between the launching of a shell and the time of its impact. That helped save lives by knowing where not to head and where to seek shelter.

They knew when to wait for the shelling to stop before running to where the shells hit in order to shoot pictures or footage, cover events and interview victims.

“The difficulty was getting anywhere when the shelling started, since most of the bridges and main roads were bombed and it made access to the Bekaa Valley and south Lebanon quite difficult, followed by difficulties in accessing the north” said Tania Mehanna of LBC-TV, Lebanon’s most watched channel.

Mehanna, who first earned her stripes covering Lebanon’s 15-year internecine fighting, garnered more kudos reporting on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years.

As a TV correspondent, Mehanna used a mobile uplink for most of her stories, which saved her from having to wind her way through tortuous bombed out roads to edit footage back at the station miles away.

“We did not need to get a ‘live feed’ point to send our stories; the live feed was traveling with us,” she said.

Other obstacles, however, hindered her reporting. Obtaining the right information was challenging if a populated neighborhood was bombed.

According to Mehanna, reporters whose aim was to disseminate the news accurately without being used by one side or the other were plagued by difficult questions. “Was it a Hizbullah stronghold, as the Israelis claimed? Was it just collateral damage? Who was really in the building?”

She confirmed El Jack’s assertion that if Hizbullah supporters were in the vicinity, it was impossible to get any version of the story but theirs.

Another problem facing the women journalists was the outward anger of civilian victims at the carpet bombing in areas like Beirut’s Shia district. They often turned against the media, at times accusing reporters of being “Jews” and “Zionists.”

Added to the mix were fears that the war would drift on interminably, as occurred with the country’s civil war. For some, the memories were still fresh, and the wounds still raw.

Mehanna says she did not fear for her own safety but worried about her teammates returning unharmed to their families.

At the height of the fighting she also battled a hostile American TV studio audience when she appeared on Fox News’ *Dayside* show and tried to explain the horrors of Israel’s aggression.

Egged on by the host, the audience mocked the Lebanese civilians' suffering and a man in the audience suggested the Arabs had fabricated the notion Israel had bombed Lebanon, insisting that the buildings that crumbled were the result of shoddy construction.

"I couldn't believe how arrogant, biased and insensitive they were," she said. "Do they live on another planet?"

"Harb Tammouz" reminded TV viewers of their correspondents' bravery and valiant track record in covering previous local or regional wars. Diana Moukalled, Tania Mehanna, Najwa Qasim and Najat Sharafeddin were but a handful of women whose names became associated with conflict.

Qasim of Al Arabiya TV, who was wounded in Iraq while covering the conflict there, stood before the camera in Beirut in the early hours of the war to proclaim: "I'm the daughter of the 'Dahiya' (southern suburbs), and following all this destruction, I love it even more."

Not to be forgotten, radio journalists pitched in with endless audio reports, commentary, talk shows and advice on which roads to avoid and how to stay safe.

Hizbullah's Al Nour (The Light) radio station, for example, featured Wafaa Hoteit, an attractive woman in her early 40s who also juggled responsibilities as the party's first female municipality member and spokesperson.

When Israel targeted Hizbullah's media, she and her colleagues were on the run, operating from clandestine studios and makeshift facilities in various parts of Beirut in an effort to keep her station operational.

Lebanese women working for foreign media were equally challenged during the Israel-Hizbullah conflict. Nada Abdel Samad of the BBC's Arabic service is a professional, cool-headed reporter who had been broadcasting from Beirut for years and continued to maintain the highest journalistic standards.

Her contacts, hallmark insights and balanced reports were especially noticeable during the latest round of fighting.

Also keeping tabs on the goings-on and helping foreign media understand the political landscape was a phalanx of Lebanese women fixers and correspondents who sometimes substituted for the foreign journalists where access was impossible.

Leena Saidi, who has worked for *The New York Times*, ABC News and others, was all over the map, covering news, translating interviews and filing copy.

Fadia Fahd, managing editor of the women's magazine *Laha (Her)* wrote an eloquent diary of her war experiences in the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat*, the mother company that owns *Laha*.

“They're sad recollections filled with scenes of death and pain, recounting the story of a nation and the sunset of dreams,” she said.

Fahd said she counted each day of the war with an equal number of tears and that the memory was seared in her heart before she wrote of it on paper. At one point, though, she lost count “as the days began resembling each other in sadness and blackness.”

On a lighter note, Mehanna said the Israelis had made her discover many things about her country.

“I didn't realize we have a lot of bridges in Lebanon,” she said referring to the dozens of structures that were demolished during the war.

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