

## Remembering Anthony Shadid's Craft and Conscience

Rami G. Khouri

The many deserved accolades and tributes to the late New York Times correspondent Anthony Shadid after his death in February were moving testaments to his life and work.<sup>1</sup> It was hard to count the many ways in which his friends and colleagues—and thousands of readers who never knew him personally—emphasized the special, even unique, aspects of his personal and professional lives. It is fitting to recall those two dimensions of his life, but also perhaps to wonder if we who are left behind can make a greater effort to go beyond merely recalling what made him special, to reach the point where his now widely noted special qualities might infuse the work and attitudes of those thousands of journalists who still deal with the Middle East and the Arab world, as writers, editors, reporters and producers.

If he was so great, why was he so unique? If his approach to journalism and covering the Middle East struck an approving chord with so many colleagues and admirers after his death, why do hundreds of others not adopt his style, approach, or mindset to the task, craft and public responsibility that he pursued with such distinction?

The full measure of people like Anthony Shadid is in both the person and the profession. These two dimensions must be separated and then fused together, in order to capture the significance of each and the power of their combination. What I conclude from my experiences knowing him for the last 13 years, during which time he came into his own and achieved the highest professional merit and recognition, is that he excelled at the craft of journalism because he brought to it a strong measure of human conscience. I felt the loss of his departure, as so many others did, in physical and emotional terms simultaneously, in the gut and the heart at the same time.

When special people like Anthony suddenly and prematurely depart this world for another, those of us who are left behind feel like a rowboat bobbing in the rolling waves of a large luxury yacht or ocean liner that has left us in its wake. We are slightly disoriented, momentarily losing our balance and direction, focused only on regaining equilibrium, and later anchorage, in a suddenly turbulent and frightening world. Acids that are only occasionally activated for special assignments go to work in the pit of our stomach. They generate sadness at the passing of his life, fear because we have been alerted to the fragility of our own lives, but also small jolts of confidence and hope—because his life and death remind us that our world was, and remains, full of gifted people like him.

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<sup>1</sup> This column has been expanded for *Arab Media & Society* and is a version of a column that appeared in the print edition of *The Daily Star* on February 18, 2012 and online at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2012/Feb-18/163735-anthony-shadid-or-humility-defined.ashx#axzz1q2O6MzQX>.

I first met Anthony in 2001 in Amman, Jordan, before he joined the Washington Post and went to Iraq. We remained friends and colleagues ever since. We met in many places and circumstances—in Amman, Beirut, Istanbul, Boston, in television and radio talk shows, and elsewhere—and I am especially pleased that we had named him in 2008 as the inaugural “writer in residence” at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, at the American University of Beirut. He came into the institute now and then during that year and used the small corner office we gave him, during visits to Beirut from his work on restoring his family’s ancestral home in Marjeyoun, south Lebanon. We chatted regularly then, and over the years, and spoke on the phone mostly about current political developments.

The more I encountered Anthony in different circumstances, read his work, and heard him on radio mostly, the less I was surprised to find that in recent years, whether in my teaching reporting and writing, or discussing Western news coverage of the Arab world, his name and work always entered the picture—and always as the example of how to cover the contemporary Middle East. What he did professionally, and how he behaved personally, proved to be meaningful to many other people, because he combined both realms in a manner that set standards of excellence that transcended his own life. This is why in remembering and eulogizing him, we should also appropriately ask about the lessons that his professional life holds for those of us still engaged in the craft that defined him—chronicling the tales of ordinary lives and the tumult of statehood that he revealed to be epics of equal significance and value.

One measure of his impact on the world of journalism in the Middle East was how often other people tried to contact him, to invite him to speak, or just to meet him and chat. In my four decades of work in this arena, his phone and email were far and away the ones that others around the region and the world most often asked for. I would always ask him before passing on his contacts to others, and he would always reply with the same gracious reply, “I’d love to see them if it works out with my schedule.”

For those of us left behind, we owe it to the person and the profession to recall what made him so special. The answer from my perspective is short and easy: personal humility in the service of professional integrity. I saw this in him every time we met, whether chatting over a coffee or meal, or in the field working, covering or discussing a story we both followed, or chatting with a person who would provide useful facts or analysis. Correctly, many of the testimonials about Anthony’s work have focused on his reporting historic events from the perspective of ordinary men and women. That is a correct description of what he did so often, but the reason why he did this is important to note. I believe it comprises two related issues.

First—professionally and analytically—he knew that the lives of ordinary men and women mattered, and that they combined to drive the fortunes of nations, and the immediate waves and recurring tides of history in the Middle East. He captured the integrity of the story by touching all its players. He rejected both personal stereotypes—the Bedouin sheikh, the army general, the crafty merchant—and grand national portraits—docile Egyptians, wily Lebanese, lazy Kuwaitis—that he knew did not correspond to the reality he experienced all around the Middle East. He captured the nuances and variety of the Middle East that actually reflected reality, and maybe that is why readers appreciated him so much, and colleagues honored him so frequently.

Second—personally and emotionally—he entered into his daily encounters with ordinary people or experts and public figures alike with a deep sense of humility that drove his need to understand them and their world, rather than to confirm a preconceived notion or his own analysis. He constantly asked questions to learn about the world he was covering, and more importantly, he listened to the answers with obvious and genuine sincerity. From the views, facts and vignettes that he gathered—the child’s torn sandal on a dusty street, the official or businessman with his Cuban cigar, the farmer struggling with an increasingly saline well, and everywhere, the booksellers and story-tellers in their community—he then reached conclusions that reflected the worldviews and circumstances of the people he chronicled.

Such behavior is the hallmark of a quality reporter, in my view, and it is a character trait that I sense is increasingly rare among foreign correspondents or indigenous journalists in the Middle East, where the tendency is to slip away from the world of street reporting and slide into the world of studio oracles and web stardom. Anthony’s special gift was his ability to pose the questions, record the answers, and leave the pontificating and moralizing to others. In the process he captured the nuances, the contradictions, and the warm and vulnerable humanity of individuals and families that in turn reflected the conditions of entire nations in situations of stress and change.

Whenever I saw him at work talking with others, whether interviewing someone or just having a conversation with colleagues, his most frequent expressions were, “oh, really?”, “you think so?”, “that’s really interesting,” and statements like that by which he reacted to the thoughts of others, acknowledging their worldviews, and parking his own. His analytical aggregating machine gathered such material, combined it with the telltale signs of societies in flux that he recorded with his eyes and ears, and ultimately offered it to his readers in his special, almost lyrical, style of writing that captured telling snapshots of men, women, soldiers and statesmen, merchants and crooks, and their many complex worlds.

The humility and warmth in his personal character generated trust among all who met him; that same humility in his low-key reporting manner generated among those he questioned or documented equally important comfort and confidence in speaking their minds honestly. The combination produced his rare example of reports over many years that accurately transmitted the world of the Middle East as it really is, and not as others in these or distant countries imagine it to be.

I will always be deeply impressed by the person of Anthony Shadid, and how he carried out his chosen profession of newspaper reporter. The stories he wrote, and the life he lived, can teach us for years to come—if we can muster his same combination of humility and diligence.

Thank you, Anthony, and God bless your memory.

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