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**Who Speaks for the Middle East: A new generation of journalists is
challenging the way their region is covered**

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Abstract

Who Speaks for the Middle East: A new generation of journalists is challenging how their region is covered

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This article is an investigation of the changes in coverage of the Middle East by the English-speaking press. It looks at how the traditional foreign-correspondent model has shifted since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and asks whether hiring reporters who come from the countries they cover will produce more accurate coverage.

In 2013, Syrian refugees were not yet considered a crisis. It would be two years before the global news feed would be inundated with images of 5.4 million frightened people packed onto life rafts or pouring across borders, determinedly clutching their children and belongings. But just because European and American media were not yet talking about the refugees, did not mean they didn't exist. And they were on Salam Darwaza's mind.

Herself the daughter of Palestinian refugees, Darwaza had been closely following the civil war in Syria, and saw in it something of her own story. And, as a documentary film producer working in Hollywood, she saw an opportunity to tell this story in a different way than she was seeing in American media.

"Everyone was just talking about ISIS," she said. But no one was talking about the refugees at all. At least the Western media was not."

To engage American audiences, she thought the story needed to be told through American eyes. She partnered with two young Californian filmmakers who were game to try life in the Za'atari refugee camp just outside Amman, Jordan for a month, not the easiest proposition at the time. They started filming at the end of 2014, just a few months after American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff had been beheaded by ISIS in Syria, and the filmmakers worried about their safety. The Jordanians running the camp were wary of the project as well.

So Darwaza met with the camp leaders herself. With long, honey-colored hair, a California tan, and a flawless American accent, Darwaza said she knows she seems Americanized. She moved from Saudi Arabia to North Carolina at the age of 14. But her time in the U.S. has not erased her Palestinian heritage. She could drink tea with the camp leaders and talk with them in Arabic about their families. And it was through this relationship building that she got the access to the camp she needed.

Darwaza's film, "Salam Neighbor," came out in the summer of 2015, right before images of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed up on a Turkish beach went viral around the world. As other journalists were scrambling to understand the refugee crisis, Darwaza and her partners had already completed a thoughtful exploration of the topic. The film was featured on the Google homepage and screened at Homeland Security, and Darwaza was honored by the U.S. State Department for her work as a storyteller. But without her role as bridge-builder, both Darwaza and the filmmakers believe it couldn't have been made.

"Our producer, Salam, was our connection," Chris Temple, one of the two filmmakers told a reporter. "The conversation around Syrian refugees and the Middle East is usually fear-based. We spent a month there and we never felt threatened or in danger. This experience changed our perception of the world, and we hope that it will change other people's minds too."

Darwaza is one of a growing number of journalists originally from the Middle East who are working to change the way the region is covered. Criticism of media about the Middle East is not new. It has now been 40 years since renowned scholar Edward Said told an interviewer that, as a Palestinian, he couldn't recognize himself in much of what was written about the Middle East in the English-language press. But despite the glut of books and articles published about the region after Sept. 11, 2001, this increased focus has not produced much clarity. Reporting on the Middle East has been haunted by factual inaccuracies both big and small. There are examples ranging from The New York Times reporting that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction in 2003 to a recent spate of gushing reports on Saudi Prince Mohamad Bin Salman by "60 Minutes" and others that failed to mention his involvement in Yemen, currently the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

And beyond getting the facts right, critics point out that coverage of the Middle East is dominated by crude stereotypes that depict the people of the region as backwards, irrational, and threatening. "Today bookstores in U.S. are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace," Said wrote in The Guardian in 2003. "All of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge, imparted by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange peoples."

Darwaza, and others producing media about the Middle East, are trying to tell a more complex story about their own countries and backgrounds. But they face daunting barriers to getting these stories into the English-language press. From a lack of access to training, to underfunded news bureaus, to working in dangerous and emotionally exhausting conditions, these journalists have to fight to get their voices heard. But they believe the stakes are so high, that they keep fighting. “I felt like there was a big gap in Western media, and I felt like this was my opportunity to fill it given my background, my experience, where I grew up,” Darwaza said.

Those gaps in media coverage of the Middle East tend to be blamed on economics—news bureaus are being closed around the world and reporters are stretched thin. The period since the Sept. 11th attacks has been a precarious time for the media as our global dependence on the internet and smart phones has fundamentally shifted the way people consume news. As international news organizations saw their business models disintegrating, they slashed funding for foreign reporting in every region in the world. It costs more than \$3 million a year to maintain the New York Times bureau in Baghdad, according to Vanity Fair. And while there are no clear global statistics, in the U.S. alone 18 U.S. newspapers and two newspaper chains closed down all their foreign bureaus between 1998 and 2011, according to the American Journalism Review.

The title foreign correspondent is still tinged with romance. But the golden age of Martha Gellhorn and Ernest Hemingway reporting from the front lines of the Spanish Civil War,

or Ed Murrow's dispatches from London during World War II is over. Today's correspondents are drawn to the work for the same humanitarian reasons as their storied predecessors, but many find themselves with so little support that they can barely do their jobs. "We saw a sudden slash of all the foreign bureaus," said Gabriele Barbati, an Italian journalist who has worked as a foreign correspondent for Sky News among others for over 10 years, first in Beijing and then in Jerusalem. "First the budgets, so all of the correspondents would have less money, and then they would all be cut down to one correspondent, and then after that the bureaus would be closed, and then after that you would use freelancers with a certain budget, and then after that they went to using freelance for almost free."

It takes funding and institutional support to get reporters on the ground so they can do good reporting, emphasized Richard Coleburn, the Jerusalem Bureau Chief for the BBC. Coleburn and his team won a Peabody for their reporting in Syria, work that would not be possible without the BBC's commitment to foreign coverage. "The BBC has invested hundreds of thousands of pounds if not millions of pounds in our reporting in places like Iraq and Syria," he said. "It means we have the capacity to get into countries despite real threats and dangers, and to have people on the ground the work who we trust and who we've given some training to check and verify information and to deliver us on-the-ground reporting." Coleburn knows the importance of this support intimately as his wife, a Syrian-Italian journalist, was kidnapped during a reporting trip to Syria in 2013. She was freed after her Italian news organization, Rai, negotiated her release.

But while it would be simpler to blame distorted Middle East coverage on funding cuts and call it a day, reporters working on the ground say there are more disturbing forces at work, chief among them a fundamental lack of understanding of the region. As a result, there have been periods when news organizations threw enormous resources, both money and staff, into covering the Middle East, and the coverage produced during those times was still rife with inaccuracies and stereotypes. A telling example is the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In December of 2002, international journalists poured into Iraqi Kurdistan preparing to cover the invasion. But many showed up with very little knowledge of the region, said Kareem Abdulrahman, an Iraqi-Kurdish journalist who was quickly hired as a translator thanks to his strong English skills. “Some people came so unprepared,” he said. “They may not have had the time or the inclination to read one book.” These journalists seemed “doomed to fail,” he said. And fail they did. The early coverage of the invasion of Iraq has been criticized as little more than government propaganda, with outlets as big as The New York Times falsely confirming the U.S. government line that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. This report was used to justify a war that has, to date, cost more than a half million Iraqi lives and more than \$3 trillion, according to The Washington Post. “I really think that in some ways Iraq turned news organizations around,” said Maggy Zanger, a journalism professor at the University of Arizona who worked for NBC during the first few months of the invasion of Iraq.

Zanger, who had been doing academic research in Kurdistan for years before the war, was hired by NBC to supplement its team of about 15 people, none of whom had any knowledge of Iraq. She was working alongside Iranian Americans who had been brought in because they spoke Persian. But although Persian has words in common with Arabic, they aren't even in the same language family, and speakers of the two languages can't understand each other. In her experience, many news organizations sent war correspondents to Iraq who were tough-guy police reporters from big cities in the U.S. "And they got to Iraq and I think they realized, wait a minute we have no idea what Sunni or Shia means, we have no idea what an ayatollah is. We don't know the language. We don't know the culture. We don't know the history," she said.

As many correspondents floundered in the lead-up to the war, Zanger saw some journalists rising to the fore. "The journalists who did quite well were those who had been in the region and who spoke the language," she said. She mentions Anthony Shadid, who died in 2012 reporting from Syria. He was Lebanese-American, but didn't grow up speaking Arabic. He later based himself in Cairo, learned the language, and reported for The Associated Press, The Washington Post, The New York Times and others.

It is journalists like Shadid, who are fluent in multiple languages and comfortable moving between cultures, who have been quietly taking over foreign news coverage all over the world. "When we talk about news organizations slashing their foreign bureaus, what

we're usually saying is that we're not sending as many expatriates overseas," said Chris Tomlinson, who ran foreign bureaus for The Associated Press in Baghdad and East Africa, among other places. While expatriate reporters are indeed being laid off, they are being replaced by local reporters, he said. The AP bureau in Nairobi went from four expat reporters in the 1990s to zero. They've all been replaced by local Kenyan reporters. "The difference is that we can hire Kenyans who can do just as good a job as an American if not a better job because it's their country. They know it better than any foreigner ever will," he said.

In the past, expatriate reporters were seen as having an advantage because they knew what their audiences back home wanted, but that's no longer the case. "A reporter growing up in Kenya or Nigeria has seen almost as much American television as any American kid," Tomlinson said. "They've been on the internet. They're digital natives." Many of his reporters were Kenyans who had spent time in the U.S. or Europe and were comfortable crossing cultures. "They could code switch. They could be Kenyan one minute and they could be an expatriate the next, depending on what was needed," Tomlinson said.

And the phenomenon Tomlinson was seeing in Africa is being replicated all over the world, including the Middle East. Like in Kenya, reporters from places like Iraq, Syria or Gaza don't face the same language or cultural barriers that reporters coming from the U.S. face. That was very much Salam Darwaza's experience. She said her ability to code

switch was sometimes uncomfortable. “I was always either too Arab or too American,” she said. She grew up as a Palestinian on an American army base in Saudi Arabia. With her American classmates she felt like the Palestinian. With her Palestinian family she felt like the American.

But her hybrid status gives her certain advantages as a storyteller. When making her film, she understood the limitations of American audiences. That’s why she convinced some of the women in the film to take off their *niqabs*, which completely covered their faces, leaving only their eyes visible. “To the West, it is so important to see the face,” she said. “It really helps to humanize the story.”

But she was also adamant about avoiding some of the weary tropes that many foreign journalists consciously or unconsciously repeat when reporting on Arab women. She said women from this region of the world are consistently portrayed as silent, covered and hidden away. “As an Arab woman I know that's not true,” she said. “It's just that the media has told that story for years and years and years.” She used her hybrid status to build trust with the women in the camp, allowing her to present female characters who, despite coming from small, conservative Syrian villages, “were very strong, very much leaders of their households, very outspoken — not at all hidden away.”

Journalists who can move fluidly across cultures “have the best of both worlds,” said Kareem Abdulrahman. After the invasion of Iraq, he was able to get a scholarship to

study journalism in the UK, and was then hired by the BBC where he worked for eight years before starting his own firm offering analysis of Kurdish issues to news organizations and other companies. He and his business partner, also Kurdish, have gone through the BBC's rigorous training, which has given them some distance from the issues they cover, allowing them to write as journalists instead of advocates. But they also have the deep knowledge of the local culture and language necessary to understand the issues they're covering.

Abdulrahman believes this allows them to see through some of the stereotypes about Kurds that have tripped up colleagues with less experience in the region. Many foreign journalists come to Iraqi Kurdistan from Baghdad, and immediately feel at ease, he said. In Baghdad, the culture is unfamiliar and there is often so much violence that journalists can't leave their hotels. Kurdistan, by contrast, is comfortingly calm with familiar American restaurant chains. But journalists get caught up in this familiarity, and miss the political corruption. "They immediately start singing about how this is the new Iraq, the different Iraq," he said. He's read multiple articles on the leadership in Kurdistan that don't mention corruption or other problems within the local government. "These are some good journalists and some of the things they are saying about Kurdistan... It's upsetting and it's sickening sometimes because it's just not true. And how could they not see it when they've been back and forth so many times?"

As Abdulrahman pointed out, reporters from outside the country often miss the consequences of the news they report on the local population. This can be seen on a much larger scale in the coverage of ISIS, where critics pointed out that the English-language focused much more attention on attacks in Europe than on ISIS' effects in the Middle East where the large majority of the danger was. Or another case is a major investigative report into the number of casualties from U.S. missile strikes in Iraq conducted by Azmat Khan, a Pakistani-American journalist, and Anand Gopal, an Afghan-American journalist for The New York Times Magazine. Because the number of casualties from these strikes had never been reported on, they spent years painstakingly traveling from village to village counting the dead, reporting for which they won the American National Magazine Award.

But despite these examples, cultural fluency is not a top priority for all editors when hiring foreign correspondents. BBC Bureau Chief Richard Colebourn said he first looks for storytelling ability. He wants "somebody with the right journalistic instincts and the right sense of what the story is who understands what the audience in the UK needs to know." The BBC has traditionally used correspondents who don't speak the local languages in the areas where they work. Colebourn believes that if a reporter can tell a compelling and engaging story, the local context can be taught along the way.

But Abdulrahman is not convinced. He said that while it would be unrealistic and unnecessary to require every journalist reporting on the Middle East to be fluent in local

languages, he has been disappointed in how few make any effort to learn. “There are so many international journalists working on the Middle East, and working there for a good part of their careers, and they really have very few local language skills,” he said. It means these journalists are not only losing much of their story in translation because they can’t read the local newspaper or understand the song playing on the car radio, but also that they are reliant on interpreters who often have their own agendas. Abdulrahman acknowledges the difficulty of learning Arabic, Persian or Kurdish, but thinks there’s more at play than just a lack of resources to learn the language. “There’s a certain level of superiority and arrogance from those of us who live in the West toward the outside world,” he said. “It just feels like we can get away with it.”

News organizations are beginning to pick up on the necessity of including more voices in their coverage. The BBC is slowly away from the rigid storytelling formats it has used in the past, and that has made room for new voices. “There’s less of a sense of, here’s the expat correspondent telling you what’s going on and mediating the story,” he said. The BBC is beginning to produce more character-based stories that are often produced by local reporters that show “a guy in Homs or Damascus or wherever, telling you about their experience and showing you what’s going on.”

Colebourn said audiences are responding well to these new formats, and although they make seasoned BBC correspondents “feel twitchy sometimes,” that for many of the producers working at his bureau, “it feels very, very liberating because they can tell stories in different ways.”

Tomlinson goes further, saying that the days of expat journalists helicoptering into report on the hottest breaking story are over. As for editors who don't want to hire local reporters, "Basically what they're saying is white guys from the West are the only people who are capable of reporting international news and that's just not true," he said.

While English-language news organizations are employing Middle Eastern journalists in ever-greater numbers, local journalists often pay an extreme price for reporting the news. A recent example is Yaser Murtaja, a Gaza-based journalist who was killed by Israeli snipers in April of this year. Murtaja did freelance work for the BBC and Vice, but, because of the blockade placed on Gaza, was unable to travel outside his territory for training. According to an NPR report, after Gaza's last tiger was rescued by an international animal welfare group, Murtaja joked to colleagues that he wished the group would rescue him too. Murtaja was killed while wearing a flack jacket clearly marked press while covering protests inside the Gaza Strip.

Like in many areas of the world, journalists throughout the Middle East face brutal conditions when trying to report the news. But unlike their foreign colleagues, local reporters often can't escape the violence when their story is done. Maggy Zanger worked for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting training Iraqi journalists in the years after the fall of Saddam Hussein. She said the crumbling of the Ba'athist regime made room for an explosion of local media outlets, and many young Iraqis came to her to train as

journalists. But, as the U.S. occupation continued over the next decade, the work became so dangerous that most of her trainees had to seek asylum outside of Iraq. She said one young Christian woman who she trained was granted asylum in the U.S. because of threats on her life. When Zanger asked the woman why she had been threatened, she replied, “I’m Christian, I’m a woman, I work in the media, I work for the UN. Take your pick.”

Working on their own, many young journalists, like Murty Faisal, an Iraqi, get exhausted and quit the business. Faisal is often mistaken for a foreigner because of his shoulder-length hair and smattering of tattoos. Since he was young, he imagined himself as some kind of guide for foreigners, showing them his country. In his vision, he was working as a tour guide, but when he started working with journalists as a fixer and translator, he realized he was doing his dream work. Faisal is a generation younger than Abdulrahman and lives in Baghdad, but when he graduated from university in 2011 the flood of foreign journalists who had come to Iraq in 2003 had not abated. Like Abdulrahman he had some of the strongest English language skills of the students in his class and he was quickly snapped up as a translator by major news outlets.

Faisal had the opportunity to work with talented reporters from around the world, and he found himself seeing his own country with new eyes as he helped them tell their stories. “I learned a lot,” he said. “When I’m walking with an American or another nationality In Iraq it gives me a different perspective from working with someone local.” He developed

a passion for film in particular and began training himself to work as a videographer. He was offered a position as a cameraman at CNN and thought this would be his life's work. But, before starting the job, the stories he was reporting began to take a toll on him. Over the last 15 years in Iraq, the everyday violence has become entrenched. For Faisal and his friends working as fixers, they were mired in the tragedy.

“I saw my friends who were working as translators, there was so much sadness and depression after Mosul after Fallujah,” he said, mentioning two recent battles to free Iraqi cities from ISIS that devastated the civilian population. “Not too many people can handle it.” Faisal started to believe that he himself was no longer handling it. “I realized it when I went to India two years ago. “I was in the jungle and there was so much nature, and all the sadness and the trauma, I felt it. I felt the PTSD there...I've never felt so afraid in my life. I was having nightmares...I realized, damn, this is really not my thing. I should stop doing it.”

For Faisal, the trauma was compounded by the fact that he didn't feel safe. Although the journalists he worked with told him that they would work equally hard to protect him from the dangers they faced on an everyday basis, he suspected that they couldn't, or wouldn't. He almost never signed a contract when he started working. “I would think to myself if something happens to this American journalist or British journalist there will be many people who will try to help, but if it happens to me (their governments) wouldn't do anything about it,” he said.

But Faisal's experience was not true at every news organization. For international wire services that have teams of people working in every region of the world, they are committed to protecting their journalists, no matter what their passport.

Chris Tomlinson said that while working at the AP he was personally involved with dozens of negotiations to get reporters released after they had been arrested or kidnapped. He said 90 percent of those stories were never reported on, but, "It doesn't matter who you are. If you ours, we're going to get you out," he said.

Beyond safety, the other justification editors use for not hiring local reporters is that they are too close to the story, and that makes them biased. Especially in a war situation like in Iraq, journalists are forced to pick sides. Maggy Zanger said Iraqi news organizations have become intensely partisan and forced their journalists to toe the party line. And Abdulrahman agrees that partisanship is an issue. "This is a global problem, but specifically in the Middle East, sometimes people cannot see beyond their religion or beyond their sect...And even some people who are very secular, they might even be atheists, but it's almost ingrained in them that the view they come from must be right."

But other editors say, while bias must be taken into account, it's not just a problem with local reporters. Any reporter could become compromised. Chris Tomlinson said that while the Associated Press has had cases of local reporters being too close to local political organizations, "expatriate reporters get into a lot of trouble." He mentioned a

woman working for a wire service who was having an affair with a Sudanese rebel leader for a year before anyone noticed. “The truth is you can get away with all kinds of biased reporting as a foreign correspondent in a developing country that you would never get away with in the West,” he said.

When asked whether reporting on the Middle East has improved since she was working for NBC more than 15 years ago, Zanger pauses. “No.” She laughs drily. Despite the crash course the media have gone through over the past 15 years, becoming comfortable with Sunni and Shia and sorting out the differences between Persian and Arabic, she still sees the same stereotypes being rehashed again and again. She lists off a few journalists, such as Jane Arraf of NPR, who are doing the brave and painstaking work necessary to produce good reporting. But says the large majority of Middle East coverage is distorted and misleading.

With violence intensifying in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, among other countries the stakes have never been higher to get the reporting of this region right. And despite the risks and the exhaustion, journalists like Salam Darwaza believe this is their moment to begin to shape the story being told about them. Darawaza has been buoyed by the recent #MeToo movement that has swept through both media organizations and Hollywood and perhaps made room for more women in positions of power. She is hoping for the same thing to happen with coverage of the Middle East. “This is a brilliant time to get in as

someone with a different perspective, with a different eye who's trying to share a global story," she said.

Chris Tomlinson also sees this new generation of Middle East reporters as an opportunity to produce better news coverage. "The one thing that expatriate foreign correspondents have traditionally added is bias, cultural supremacy, and condescension," he said. "A lot of foreign correspondents have produced a lot of really racist, ethnocentric copy over the years and I'm not at all sad to lose that."

There is of course a long list of foreign correspondents who don't fit Tomlinson's description, and who have produced accurate and groundbreaking reporting, often at great personal cost. Despite these examples though, foreign reporting is still dominated by outsiders, many with little to no experience in the areas they're covering. But as a new generation of reporters with deep ties to the region pushes to the fore, they are beginning to shift the story being told about the Middle East.