

Interview - Dalal Mawad

Written by E-International Relations

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Dalal Mawad is a Senior Middle East and North Africa Video Producer at *The Associated Press*. Previous roles include working for the United Nations Refugee Agency, the Lebanese broadcaster *LBCI* and for *Al Jazeera English*. She has reported on many topics throughout her career, including displacement, human rights issues in Lebanon and the conflict in Syria. Mawad holds a Masters in International Political Economy from the London School of Economics and a Masters in Journalism from Columbia University.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Today, the media is focused on the coronavirus pandemic and trying, just like any other industry, to adapt to a new reality. How do we keep our people safe without losing ownership of the story? How do we convey stories and news using the most factual and sober approach? Are we giving enough context? Are our stories informative or explanatory enough? A few months into the crisis, what stories should we look for to keep the readers' and viewers' interest? Do we have enough stories covering solidarity and resilience so as to uplift our viewers in difficult times like these? What are the ethical considerations in some of our stories? Can we play a role, as journalists, in helping with the response to the pandemic through our storytelling and by sharing information?

Prior to the coronavirus crisis, there was a growing interest in looking deeper into environmental stories, climate change and conflicts arising from the impact of global warming. I believe these will continue to be important topics when the current crisis has passed. The other major issue under debate is around social media, how it facilitates the spread of fake news and subsequently how traditional media outlets can go about maintaining a position in the market amidst this huge flow of information. How can they use social media to their advantage – as a primary platform, a tool of reporting or for dissemination? How much control do we still have over the news?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In my 20s, I wanted to change the world around me and thought that I could. Looking back, I feel like I was naïve. Although my work has helped shaped debates, maybe changed certain perceptions and had an indirect impact, it has not had the power I expected it to have. I think a lot of journalists feel the same way. We go into this vocation thinking that our stories – the truth – might do something. But the world is much more complicated than that. There are more layers to change than we think and therefore more resistance. Our work is certainly meaningful in many ways, but it is often just a tiny drop in a vast ocean.

I went into journalism wanting to give marginalised people a voice and to shed light on the truth and the injustices around me, thinking people would then be held to account. But I discovered that too often not much changes. In my 30s, I decided to keep doing what I do but I gave up my expectations of having a big impact. I stopped putting that pressure on myself by accepting that there are things that I cannot change alone through a story or a report. I never and will never give up my ideals and I will always believe that journalism is more than just a job or merely information sharing, but I have learnt to adapt to reality and recognise its limitations.

To what extent are you able to apply the knowledge and skills you developed during your post-graduate

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studies (International Political Economy and Journalism) in your current role as a journalist? What motivated you to specialise in video journalism?

My first graduate degree was very theoretical and I will admit that it was not very useful in the career I eventually picked, however it equipped me to better understand the world around me. In my work as a journalist, it gave me a lot of knowledge that not many journalists have, especially when covering economic stories, international financial crises and international stories in general. Conversely, my master's in journalism was very useful for the career I have now. I attended Columbia Journalism School precisely in order to switch careers, as I was not a journalist prior to that. That year taught me how to find stories, write them, film them and edit them in addition to all the technical skills I would need in the media industry; there are so many tools that you can use in video. I wanted to work with video because I believe images and video are the most powerful medium to tell a story and share information, particularly since, when it comes to mass rather than niche audiences, people do not generally read as much as they watch. I also always had an interest in cinema and long form documentaries and it felt like this degree was a step in the right direction.

Through your work reporting on refugees and displacement, you have argued that people relate more to individual stories as opposed to those that depict refugees as a group or a number. What are the main advantages and limitations of video journalism in conveying these stories and challenging negative attitudes towards refugees?

Putting a face to a story is key as it helps people not to just remember the story but also to relate and identify with it. Video is a great medium to tell human interest stories that are character led and I have previously written about the power of positive character led stories. You can literally see the person, know them and hear from them. You give them a voice. It is also easier, in the case of refugees, to see their plight and sympathise with them than when you just read about it. As I said earlier, images can be powerful and have a greater impact than a text story.

The main limitation of video is time. Unless you are working on a documentary, you only have so many minutes you can use to tell a story and therefore you do not always get to delve deep into a subject or a character. You also often stumble on protection concerns with video, especially when the subject is refugees or victims of violence and war. The need to protect their identity when telling their story can be visually limiting.

In your previous role as a video producer for the UN Refugee Agency, you covered the integration of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). How has this region benefited from welcoming displaced people? What have been the main challenges in this approach?

In the KRI, refugees are allowed to work and to contribute to the economy. This helps them to integrate and that is beneficial for both the refugees and the host community. Unlike many host communities around the world that place tight restrictions on the jobs available to refugees, Syrians living in Erbil and elsewhere within the KRI are free to work, provided that they hold recognised qualifications as necessary. Erbil is part of a growing global network of municipalities that are opting to embrace refugees and the opportunities they bring, giving hope to the world's most vulnerable by offering not just a sanctuary but also the chance to become part of the social fabric.

I think the marginalisation of refugees in general is counterproductive and can be dangerous. They need to be given the opportunity to contribute to the country that has hosted them – we have seen throughout history what refugees and migrants are able to achieve when given that opportunity. They sometimes bring skills much needed by the host country, bring innovation and creativity, start new businesses and enrich the local culture. The main challenge is that refugees' integration can be politically charged in many places and used by populist leaders to scare the population, sometimes on unsupported ground. There is often resistance when a country is in a dire economic situation. In Lebanon for example, there is a local concern that refugees are occupying jobs needed by the locals or depleting already scarce resources and a weak infrastructure. While some of these concerns might be true, they are generally not based on facts or scientific studies. Within proper institutional and labor frameworks, I believe there is always room for refugees' contribution and it is a win-win game.

Civil protests have been ongoing in Lebanon since October 2019, with contributing factors including

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taxation, economic stagnation and opposition to sectarian rule. From your experience covering these protests, what are the most significant issues which continue to bring demonstrators to the streets?

All the issues that triggered the demonstrations are still there. Nothing has changed and actually the situation has become even worse. Lebanon is going through its worst economic and financial crisis, its currency has lost more than half of its value on a parallel market, inflation is getting worse and many people are unemployed. Banks have imposed informal capital controls which limit the withdrawal and transfer of dollars. More than half the population is living below the poverty line. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic came as an economic gut punch at a time when Lebanon was already mired in the worst financial crisis in its history. While residents of many other countries can count on government support, that is not an option in a country teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

Many of the protesters did not believe that the new cabinet that was formed in January represented them or their aspirations, viewing them as just another pro-political elite government, disguised as independent technocrats but actually representing the traditional political parties. People took to the streets primarily for economic reasons but they are also protesting against the ruling class and the politicians that have ruled the country for decades. They want these politicians to leave office, to bring corruption to an end and for an independent judiciary capable of bringing corrupt leaders and civil servants to justice. They desire new elections under a new electoral law.

It has been claimed that different factions, such as Hezbollah, have been able to gain from the current crisis in Lebanon by providing assistance where the state is failing to do so, even deploying their own ambulance services and clinics. How significant are sectarian dividing lines?

No one has gained from this specific crisis, since everyone's constituency is in a dire situation. Lebanon's politics has always been known for its patronage system. The current crisis has made it more difficult for parties to maintain their patronage system because they are short of funding and resources. But in general, parties and politicians, usually in government, provide citizens with services and goods outside of the state institutions. Hezbollah is no exception. Farmers for example, have traditionally complained that the government provides little in the way of assistance, which has left an opening for political parties such as Hezbollah to fill. Public institutions, in general, provide poor services and so parties step in to compensate instead of working on strengthening and improving the public sector. You have to understand that the notion of a state in Lebanon is quasi absent. And it is a vicious cycle, because it is those same politicians and parties who are in power that keep the state weak and then use their power to fill in the gap. This is a way for parties to consolidate their grip on their communities and constituencies.

Do you expect external actors to become more involved in the current crisis in Lebanon? What role, if any, could the international community be expected to play in supporting a resolution?

Yes I do. Lebanon has always been the theatre of regional and foreign interference in general, in politics first, but also in terms of economic support. There have been various international conferences since the early 2000s to support Lebanon financially. The last one was two years ago and it required Lebanon to meet certain conditions for the release of \$11 billion in loans and grants made by international donors in Paris. That money has yet to be released, but there are hopes among Lebanese officials that an IMF program will help to release the badly needed money, now that the crisis is at its peak. Recently the government presented a long-awaited five-year economic rescue plan based on which it would seek financial assistance from the IMF. The leader of Hezbollah threw his support behind the government move despite previous opposition to any IMF role.

What is the most important advice you could give to scholars interested in pursuing a career in journalism?

I think experience is key in journalism and it is really a profession you learn by doing. Go on the streets, talk to people, research your subject by being embedded in it and find interesting characters and stories. The field is key in this profession. Build a portfolio of stories you do yourself in the field. I am a senior producer now and I have largely a desk job, with a margin of editorial decision-making, but I could not do this if I had not spent many years in the field. Be ready to show some flexibility, prepare yourself for multi-tasking and teach yourself many skills. The industry has

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changed and it is harder to find a job in traditional media. You should be open to working outside of the traditional outlets, for example with international organisations and others such as I did with the UN – there is room there for storytelling, communication and sometimes better financial compensation.