
Journalist Under Fire

Khaled Abu Toameh

Tali Yahalom

Khaled Abu Toameh is an award-winning journalist who specializes in and writes about Palestinian affairs. Though he primarily writes for *The Jerusalem Post*, his articles appear in a wide range of publications, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, and *Commentary*. As an Arab-Israeli, Khaled's unique background has enabled him to make his mark not only in news journalism but also in broadcast, where he has produced expository documentaries on Yasser Arafat, Arafat's payments to the armed wing of Fatah, and general financial corruption within the Palestinian Authority. Toameh, whose life has been threatened many times by Palestinian leaders, lives in east Jerusalem.

Kedma: Tell me about your job on a daily basis – what do you do?

Toameh: I cover what happens in the West Bank in Gaza, which requires me to travel to these areas. Until recently, it was no problem because I went to the Gaza Strip. In recent trips, myself and many of my colleagues have stopped going to the Gaza Strip for security reasons. I'm covering a conflict and it's not very easy for a journalist to be out there in these areas. In general it's not easy to cover a conflict because you're dealing with two sides that are fighting each other and that are at war with each other and, of course, both parties have an interest in affecting or trying to affect the media and the way it covers this conflict.

Kedma: How did you get into journalism?

Toameh: I've always been saying that journalism has to be in your blood. It's

not something you go and study to pursue later. You have to be a curious person, you have to be someone with a lot of awareness and you have to be someone who's very inquisitive and someone who wants to know everything and I've been like this from a very early age.

Kedma: Who are your role models?

Toameh: Many. It's mostly local journalists here or foreign journalists who are working here. I've worked with hundreds of journalists and I've learned a lot from many of them and I have a lot of respect for some of them. But I can't really point at one or two or three people and say these are my role models. I've learned different things from different journalists...I've learned to pursue a story to the end, I've learned never to take things for granted, I've learned to ask difficult questions [and] different ways of pressuring interviews.

Kedma: What was your most difficult story/interview?

Toameh: The interview with Yasser Arafat. There's always a concern if you ask him the wrong question – the guy used to get mad, he'd get angry. And he had these outbursts and, many times, there was a lot of tension in the air during the interviews with him. Other difficult scenarios are when you're covering the violence, the clashes between Palestinians and Israelis, and sometimes you get caught in the middle when they're shooting at each other. These are life-threatening situations and they're very difficult

Kedma: Do you travel with security?

Toameh: At the height of the violence of the Intifadah, let's say, we were traveling around with helmets and bulletproof vests and armored vehicles. Now, things have calmed down a bit so there's no longer a need for them, but we don't travel with security guards or agents or anything.

Kedma: Have you ever received any threats?

Toameh: I wouldn't call them threats as much as criticism. But sometimes criticism can be very tough and there can be insinuations and hints about "Why did you publish this? Why did you publish that story? Be careful, don't

touch on sensitive issues.” Again, things like that, I wouldn’t say these are direct threats, [it’s] not that they’re saying we’re going to kill you, but one comes under a lot of pressure and attack – verbal attacks.

Kedma: As a journalist, what are some tenets that you live by?

Toameh: The truth. Telling the story as it is. Trying to detach yourself from emotions. The most important thing is to present a fair and balanced picture of what’s happening and always bearing in mind that there’s more than one side to the story. And trying to give all parties a platform to express their opinion.

Kedma: Who is your target audience? Who do you hope is picking up and reading your work?

Toameh: Many of my stories are published on the Internet. The audiences are mostly English-speaking people abroad because I write mostly in English. I have a huge readership in America. I would like to see more Arabs reading my stories and some of my stories are translated into Arabic and published in Arab newspapers and websites, but it’s not enough.

Kedma: What role do you see the media playing in the Arab-Israeli conflict?

Toameh: A huge role, and it’s not new. Actually, the real conflict is taking place in the media. It’s over perceptions, it’s over how you are portrayed in the media. Both sides are fighting a PR war. Both sides want to look good and both sides know that, in order to reach public opinion, you need to get to the media, so most of the struggle is actually taking place in the media. The media is playing a major role in providing a platform to all the parties, and both Israelis and Palestinians care very much about what the media writes. They’re very sensitive, they’re very vulnerable.

Kedma: Do you think that either side is portrayed more favorably in the media?

Toameh: We can’t talk about the media as one whole unit. [We] can’t say that all the media is the same. There are different publications with different agendas, with conflicting agendas. There are media that are actually biased and

do openly favor one side against the other. There are media publications that look at this conflict and say there are good guys and bad guys.

Kedma: Do you think you have more credibility to your readers because of your controversial and somewhat unique background?

Toameh: Perhaps. I think you're correct, because I'm an Arab Muslim. I'm also an Israeli citizen; I'm someone with no agenda at all. I put things on the table and I bring the story as straightforward as it is and I think what adds to my credibility is the fact that I work with many journalists over here consultant on Palestinian affairs. I've been around for so long. And I've been able to maintain my credibility and integrity as a professional journalist.

Kedma: How come you chose to write for *The Jerusalem Post*, an Israeli newspaper?

Toameh: I'm prepared to write for any newspaper that provides me with a free platform that does not interfere with my writing. *The Jerusalem Post* provides me with a free platform. And I wish we had a similar media in the Arab world or in the Palestinian area as well and that we could write almost anything [we] want, but unfortunately, we don't have a free media in the Palestinian areas.

Tali Yahalom is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is majoring in American history and minoring in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and English.