



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Journalism in exile: A plea for better support of refugee journalists

By *

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Contents

Introduction	3
An exodus to Istanbul	5
IRAQI IN EXILE: Ali's story	6
When Erdoğan wept	7
PALESTINIAN IN EXILE: Maisoun's story	8
The reaction in Egypt	10
YEMENI IN EXILE: Mohammed's story	12
The unravelling	14
SYRIAN IN EXILE: Amal al-Shami's story	16
What is the fate of the 700?	18
LIBYAN IN EXILE: Salem's story	20
Conclusion	22

Introduction

In my experience, there are not many journalists in exile who are willing or able to speak frankly about their displacement – certainly not among the Middle Eastern journalists who fled to Turkey following the Arab Spring. The stakes are too high: the fear of reprisal, loss of visa status, the threat of extradition to unsafe homelands...

I know these fears intimately: I left Egypt for the safety of Turkey, and have since resettled in the UK. When I received a place on the Reuters Institute Journalism Fellowship through the Journalism Under Pressure Fund, I knew I wanted to tell the stories of other journalists in exile.

So I asked my network of journalists to take part in an anonymous questionnaire about their experience of seeking refuge in Turkey. In all, 31 responded to my questions. Of those who found work (which is illegal on a tourist visa), 90% said they had received no work permit and no work contract.



Media workers gather in protest of the pressure on free speech and journalism in Istanbul, Turkey, June 29, 2021. REUTERS/Umit Bektas

Seeking employment in this way left them open to extortion: 83% said they had been subjected to professional blackmail, and 78% said they had faced material extortion in the form of unpaid overtime, docked pay, or heavier workloads. What pay they did receive was often minimal: 71% said they were not earning enough to cover their expenses, and 43% said they couldn't afford to pay for training to improve their journalistic skills. Under these immense pressures, 37% said they had left the field of journalistic work.

Resettlement and integration has not been easy for most: 69% said they had experienced discrimination in Turkish society based on their race or immigration status. All of this has had a huge impact on mental health: 74% said they had experienced depression and loneliness, while 49% admitted having had suicidal thoughts.

Here, I try to record the story of why so many Arab journalists fled to Turkey, and how it all went terribly wrong for so many. Finally, I make some recommendations for how I believe a repeat of the Turkey fiasco can be avoided. I have also included the real-life stories of journalists in exile from Yemen, Palestine, Syria and Iraq. Their names and some identifying details have been changed for their protection.

An exodus to Istanbul

In September 2011, just shy of a year after a wave of anti-dictatorial protests swept the Middle East and North Africa, the then-Turkish Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began his Arab Spring Tour.

Touting Turkey and its booming economy as the model of a successful Islamic democracy, he was hailed a hero in Egypt and Tunisia. In Libya, he told a crowd gathered on Martyrs' Square in Tripoli, Libya: "Turkey will fight with you until you take all your victory. You proved to all the world that nothing can stand in the way of what the people want."¹

A Pew Research study in July 2012 named Erdogan the most popular leader in the region, far ahead of second-favourite King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.²

So when the revolutions turned into counter-revolutions and civil wars, it was this image of Erdogan's progressive Turkey that many journalists – and even whole media houses – thought they were fleeing to. They came from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and more – thousands of journalists who had fallen foul of shifting power centres.

There are no official figures to be referenced here – most journalists in Turkey have continued to work without official paperwork. But by my own estimation, in consultation with various organisations related to Arab media professionals in Turkey, there were still as many as 2,000 Arab journalists and 13 media outlets operating out of Turkey in 2021.

Of course, geography plays a role too: Turkey shares borders with Syria and Iraq. Obtaining a tourist visa to enter is relatively simple for most Arab passport holders. And,

¹ Christie-Miller, A., 2011. Erdoğan pitches Turkey's democratic model on 'Arab Spring' tour. [online] CS Monitor. Available at: <<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0916/Erdogan-pitches-Turkey-s-democratic-model-on-Arab-Spring-tour>>

² Kohut, A., 2021. Chapter 1. Public Mood After the Arab Spring. [online] Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project. Available at: <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2012/07/10/chapter-1-public-mood-after-the-arab-spring/>>

being an Islamic country, many thought it would be easy to integrate culturally into Turkish society.

IRAQI IN EXILE: Ali's story

I arrived in Turkey in June 2014, after the outbreak of war between ISIS and government forces. At the time, Turkey was the best escape from Iraq. Back home, I was responsible for the main monthly newspaper in my home city, in addition to writing for local magazines and Arab websites. When the trouble started, there was no choice but to declare allegiance to a side of the conflict, and report in their favour. But I wasn't interested in picking a side, so I left.

I lost my older brother. He was arrested by ISIS and his arrest was followed by a prolonged enforced disappearance. We thought he had been murdered. The loss had a hugely negative impact on me and my family. It forced me to forget the idea of returning to my country.

The system of settlement in Turkey was not perfect, but as someone fleeing a war, anything was better than the nightmare of what was unfolding in my country.

I tried to adapt and integrate with Turkish society as much as possible, and to learn the language. After five years here, I was able to get a work permit. I know this is lucky, as there are many who have been here longer and still do not qualify.

It's not only the employers at fault; the government mandates that a business must employ five Turkish citizens in exchange for any foreigner who obtains a work permit. You can see why it is not easy to grant work permits and health insurance. And if you don't have a work permit, you can be exposed to dismissal or docking of pay and time off, and there is no legal recourse. But we've adapted to these labour conditions because we have no choice.

When Erdoğan wept

President Mohammed Morsi was ousted by the Egyptian military in July 2013. A month later, Erdoğan went on live television and [wept openly](#) for his former ally while a letter by Muslim Brotherhood politician Muhammad al-Baltagi was being read.³ In the months that followed, Brotherhood-supporting news networks were welcomed into Turkey. Al-Sharq, Mekameleen, Watan and others set up satellite television operations out of Istanbul with funding from abroad.^{4,5}

The hospitality was not limited to the media: politicians and activists aligned with Morsi were welcomed into the Turkish “safe house”, too. But if Erdoğan had hoped the Muslim Brotherhood and its media would use their time in Turkey to forge a path for return to power that he could use as a political card, he must have been sorely disappointed.

Over the next five years, the move to Turkey [exacerbated rifts](#) in the political movement, diluted the media agenda, fueled fierce competition over scarce funding, and exposed the indecent treatment of employees and cronyism.⁶ Responsibility for the Egyptian Brotherhood exiles was handed off to the Ministry of Interior (MoI).⁷ Most journalists who moved across with their news channels were granted one-year tourist visas. To date, they must continue to apply to the MoI for renewal each year.

³ Aslan, S., 2020. Public Tears: Populism and the Politics of Emotion in AKP's Turkey. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 53(1), pp.1-17.

⁴ Middle East Monitor. 2021. Egypt's opposition TV channels are a rare phenomenon. [online] Available at: <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200819-egypts-opposition-tv-channels-are-a-rare-phenomenon/>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

⁵ Hamzawy, A. and Dunne, M., 2019. Egypt's Political Exiles: Going Anywhere but Home. [online] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/29/egypt-s-political-exiles-going-anywhere-but-home-pub-78728>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

⁶ McElroy, D., 2020. Turkey provides base for '20,000 Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood' supporters. [online] Available at: <<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/turkey-provides-base-for-20-000-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-supporters-1.1065871>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

⁷ <https://en.goc.gov.tr/residence-permit-types>

A select few influential opposition leaders were granted permanent residence or Turkish nationality. When news of this favouritism leaked, it created even more rifts. And attempts to rectify the situation – by presenting the MoI with a list of 700 media workers who should also be granted special citizenship – made matters worse still when 50 names were “forgotten” from the list.^{8,9,10}

It was Ankara’s failed experiment in the exertion of soft power, and relations with important Arab leaders soured as a result – not least in Cairo, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.^{11,12}

PALESTINIAN IN EXILE: Maisoun’s story

I’ve held Egyptian asylum status since 1967. I left Palestine and managed to build a life in Cairo, and even a thriving publishing business. But in late 2019 I was forcibly removed because my journalistic work was deemed a threat. I haven’t found Istanbul to be a city of safety. My political, cultural and anti-military sentiments have all been obstacles in my way to permanently settling in Turkey.

Many things have obstructed my access to the protections that political refugees should have in accordance with international law. If you are a non-Syrian refugee, you are expected to show a level of ideological support and affiliation to certain

⁸ En.dunyatimes.com. 2021. Turkey continues relaxed visa regime for Egyptians | Dünya Times. [online] Available at: <<http://en.dunyatimes.com/article/turkey-continues-relaxed-visa-regime-for-egyptians-37451.html>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

⁹ Soylu, R., 2021. Turkey grants citizenship to hundreds of Egyptians living in exile. [online] Middle East Eye. Available at: <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-egypt-exiles-citizenships-granted-hundreds>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

¹⁰ Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East. 2021. Erdogan’s rapprochement with Egypt comes at expense of Brotherhood. [online] Available at: <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/erdogans-rapprochement-egypt-comes-expense-brotherhood>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

¹¹ Taştekin, F., 2021. Turkey begs Egypt for forgiveness. [online] Duvar English. Available at: <<https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkey-begs-egypt-for-forgiveness-article-57394>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

¹² Bianco, C. and Aydıntaşbaş, A., 2021. Useful enemies: How the Turkey-UAE rivalry is remaking the Middle East. [online] ECFR. Available at: <<https://ecfr.eu/publication/useful-enemies-how-the-turkey-uae-rivalry-is-remaking-the-middle-east/>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

political parties. With the exception of economic citizenship, there are no clear laws or paths for granting non-tourist residencies. Most are granted a tourist residency for one year, which is only renewed with the approval of the Ministry of Interior.

Even international institutions such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees put huge obstacles in the way of receiving protection and assistance, regardless of the asylum and displacement labels on people forced to exile to Turkey. Some of the obstacles include assigning you to live in specific non-centralised areas, and banning moving from one city to another except with special permits that must be approved by the Ministry of Interior. Less than US\$25 a month is given in aid – this in a country suffering from economic hardship and inflation. It is not enough to cover housing, health and general living expenses.

Because I work in the field of journalism and live in Istanbul, the various Arab journalists associations were important to me – despite the lack of professionalism and corruption of most of those in charge of these institutions. There are grave violations against journalists here – to the point of handing them over to the authorities for deportation, or preventing them from obtaining tourist residencies, and blacklisting them from working in other institutions. Despite the presence of two institutions for Arab journalists in Turkey, there is no one to protect them.

The biggest obstacle to integration in Turkish press institutions is the language barrier. Learning Turkish is very difficult, especially in our profession that depends on good writing and not just the spoken language.

After more than a year here, I'm still unable to get a permanent job – partly because of Covid-19, partly because I am not affiliated with the religious parties that own many media institutions here. I write articles from time to time in newspapers and institutions outside Turkey. I've written to many international organisations to ask for help in seeking asylum in any European country. I am still waiting.

The reaction in Egypt

On May 16, 2018, during the Fifth National Youth Conference, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi threatened opposition TV channels abroad, and journalists working there, saying “anybody speaking against us on TV channels abroad will all be held accountable”.¹³

His call was picked up and echoed by media outlets still operating in Egypt – sometimes to alarming degrees. In an episode of his talk show [90 Minutes](#), on September 12, 2018, Mohamed El-Baz, chairman of the Board of Directors of Al-Dustour newspaper, declared of talk show hosts abroad: “Any Egyptian who finds Moataz Matar or Ayman Nour or Muhammad Nasir should kill them. And if you would like to accuse me of inciting murder, oh yes, I am.”¹⁴

In July 2019, Al Jazeera journalist Magdy Aziz reported that documents from the Egyptian Ministry of Defence had been intercepted, namely reports on the media compiled by the military between 2016 and 2017 about what the international press and opposition channels now based in Turkey were saying about Egypt and whether any of these should be considered a threat to security.¹⁵

Each report included an analysis: who spoke for how long about what, and did they consider their coverage of the Egyptian president and army negative, positive or neutral? The ministry’s reports recognised that, despite the ban, opposition channels were still managing to sway public opinion in Egypt.

¹³ EgyptToday. 2018. Sisi threatens provocative media deceiving Egyptians. [online] Available at: <<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/50333/Sisi-threatens-provocative-media-deceiving-Egyptians>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

¹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrqO2UE_e3I

¹⁵ Aziz, M., 2019. This is how the Egyptian army makes its propaganda and confronts the opposition. [online] Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/7/31/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

It's easy to see why the opposition channels in Turkey, for all their faults, were getting under El-Sisi's skin. They were creating a careful archive of human rights violations committed under his rule: gathering video and audio over an eight-year period of the arrest of activists, extrajudicial executions and other crimes.¹⁶

One eminent example is the [#SisiLeaks](#) of 2014 and 2015 – the authenticity of which the Egyptian government continue to deny – in which a voice said to be El-Sisi's can be heard declaring his resentment toward the Gulf countries, revealing information about arms deals, and alluding to corruption.¹⁷

While editors in chief in Egypt were ordered to attend monthly “[training](#)” at Nasser Military Academy on how to report on the government, TV channels in Turkey were documenting corruption of the military establishment and its intrusion into the civil sector.

They told the “other side” of stories like [Nahda Dam](#), the murder of the Italian researcher [Giulio Regeni](#), the islands of [Tiran and Sanafir](#).

By September 2020, El-Sisi was so riled by the coverage he brought it to the 75th session of the United Nations [General Assembly](#), saying: “It is unfortunate that the international community continues to turn a blind eye to the a handful of countries who support terrorists, whether financially or by providing them with safe havens, as well as media and political platforms.”¹⁸

¹⁶ France 24. 2020. Non-governmental organizations confirm that the human rights file in Egypt is the worst since Sisi came to power. [online] Available at: <[¹⁷ New York Times. 2015. Leaks Gain Credibility and Potential to Embarrass Egypt's Leaders \(Published 2015\). \[online\] Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/13/world/middleeast/leaks-gain-credibility-and-potential-to-embarrass-egypts-leaders.html>> \[Accessed 15 October 2021\].](https://www.france24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7/20201208-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%87%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A3-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B0-%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85> [Accessed 16 December 2021].</p></div><div data-bbox=)

¹⁸ 2021. United Nations. [online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwoEaIZCyGU>> [Accessed 15 October 2021].

YEMENI IN EXILE: Mohammed's story

I am 32 years old, and worked for the press from 2008 until 2016, when I was kidnapped from my home by the Houthis because of my reporting. They imprisoned me for 14 months until I was released in an exchange deal with government forces. This forced me to leave my home in Sana'a, where I had lived since I was born. I cannot return to Sana'a for fear I will be killed or imprisoned again.

In February 2018, I was invited to Switzerland to participate in a Human Rights Council session to talk about my experience of being kidnapped and imprisoned. On my way home from Geneva, I transited through Istanbul and the advice of many colleagues was to settle down here to protect myself, so I did.

When I entered Turkey, my goal was to obtain a tourist residency like the rest of my colleagues. I suffered a lot until my wife and children arrived a year later. I hadn't thought of seeking asylum here as Turkey does not give asylum seekers advantages. I didn't not feel that my situation would be any different.

All Arab opposition media people work here without legal employment contracts. We are refugees, but we do not have rights, asylum papers, or asylum privileges. I did not have official employment papers despite my work in a Yemeni TV channel. We work here without legal basis and without licenses with the Turkish government's knowledge.

As for my situation in Turkey, it is natural to feel lonely far from my homeland, but after arriving here I felt stability. I was in a country where the Houthis could not reach me. The inability to mingle within Turkish society was the most difficult thing. I am also worried that Turkey might issue new rules regarding tourist residencies at any time, which might force us to return to Yemen. The worst feeling is waiting for the unknown.

I still suffer from the psychological and physical health consequences caused by the imprisonment trauma. I also faced a lot of economic problems. My kidnapping caused me and my family to lose our home and car. I had to sell them at the cheapest price in order to pay off the debts I incurred while I was kidnapped. Currently, what I earn from my work here in Turkey is not enough to support myself and help my family in Yemen. This made me unable to get treatment for the damages inflicted upon me in Houthi prisons. Work and the government do not provide us with health insurance, and private treatment is exorbitant.

Our situation here depends on the political situation, and any change may bring us down. There are no charters or laws that obliges them to protect us, so now all I dream about is obtaining citizenship or permanent residence, so as not to worry that one day I might not be able to renew my annual residency.

The unravelling

Back in Turkey, Erdoğan's play at being a uniting progressive force for the Middle East began to unravel when trouble in his own backyard demanded attention: the 2013 Gezi Protest grew into 5,000 rallies attended by 3.5 million Turkish people who wanted more civic freedoms, press freedoms, and a return to secularism.

Erdoğan responded unsympathetically, telling protestors: "Where they gather 20, I will get up and gather 200,000 people. Where they gather 100,000, I will bring together one million from my party."¹⁹ He grew increasingly authoritarian in his stance.

By 2016, one third of all imprisoned journalists, media workers and executives in the world were in Turkey's prisons, with the vast majority waiting to be brought to trial.²⁰ The July 2016 coup d'état attempt, and the state of emergency decree that followed it, led to the closure of 180 media outlets. By 2017 Amnesty International went so far as to proclaim "the death of journalism in Turkey".²¹ In 2018, CPJ said Turkey, China, and Egypt were responsible for more than half of those jailed around the world for the third year in a row.²²

With a new taste of civil unrest and the news media who cover it, Erdoğan began to sound more like El-Sisi in his complaints: "Our country has faced a serious unfair stance and double standard. The ones who burned down the streets have been presented as peaceful

¹⁹ Delaney, K., 2021. Turkey's park protest proves problematic for prime minister. [online] Quartz. Available at: <<https://qz.com/90129/turkeys-pak-protest-proves-problematic-for-prime-minister/>> [Accessed 15 October 2021].

²⁰ Amnesty International. 2016. Turkey: journalism is not a crime. [online] Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/02/free-turkey-media/>> [Accessed 15 October 2021].

²¹ Amnesty International. 2017. A prison of silence - the death of journalism in Turkey. [online] Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/02/free-turkey-media/>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

²² Beiser, E., 2021. Hundreds of journalists jailed globally becomes the new normal - Committee to Protect Journalists. [online] Committee to Protect Journalists. Available at: <<https://cpj.org/reports/2018/12/journalists-jailed-imprisoned-turkey-china-egypt-saudi-arabia/>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

protestors by the international media outlets who were broadcasting live for 24 hours," the president told the TRT World Forum last December.²³

In the same time period, in the case of the Egyptian opposition media that Erdoğan had agreed to play host to, it was becoming clear that he may have bet on the wrong horse. He allowed the channels in without need for licenses, taxes, or any of the other conditions that applied to Turkish institutions or foreign media outlets operating there.^{24,25}

In my own experience, and that of other Egyptian refugee journalists that I've spoken to: staff at these channels were working without contracts, work permits, health insurance or any other support required by Turkish labour bureaus. No one monitored where their funding came from, or where it went.²⁶ There was no supervision, no accountability and no documentation.

The early intention of granting such extraordinary freedoms for channels to operate without oversight may have originally been to make it easier for refugee journalists to do their work. But as the years progressed, it resulted in impossible conditions for refugee journalists who had no authority through which to seek support or redress.

Worse off than the Egyptian journalists are those from other Arab countries – particularly Syrians, who are not allowed to travel inside Turkey without obtaining a travel permit. In June 2019, Syrian journalist Hussein al-Taweel was arrested in Reyhanli while trying to get

²³ Daily Sabah. 2020. Erdoğan criticizes int'l media for silence on France's media blockade. [online] Available at: <<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-criticizes-intl-media-for-silence-on-frances-media-blockade>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

²⁴ Middle East Monitor. 2021. Opposition TV channels in Turkey are giving Sisi's regime a major headache. [online] Available at: <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210322-opposition-tv-channels-in-turkey-are-giving-sisis-regime-a-major-headache/>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

²⁵ Middle East Monitor. 2020. Egypt's opposition TV channels are a rare phenomenon. [online] Available at: <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200819-egypts-opposition-tv-channels-are-a-rare-phenomenon/>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

²⁶ AP NEWS. 2021. Concern mounts about possible Turkish law on media funding | AP News. [online] Available at: <<https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-business-government-and-politics-media-a531f8654d36f3011e85b40e5fdb2c4c>> [Accessed 16 December 2021].

a temporary residence permit, and deported to Syria.²⁷ In the same month, journalist Obeida al-Omar was arrested despite having a temporary residency, and forced to sign a statement he did not understand saying he would voluntarily return to Syria. Journalist Yarub al-Dalyman was arrested and deported on July 9th of the same year, when he was about to obtain temporary residency. He was beaten and deported a month later. There has been no official report confirming their whereabouts today.

SYRIAN IN EXILE: Amal al-Shami's story

I'm 27 years old. I moved to Istanbul in May of 2018 after I was forcibly displaced from Eastern Ghouta to Idlib in northern Syria. From there, I used an illegal smuggling route to enter Istanbul.

I tried to integrate as much as possible in Turkish society, but because I work with Arabs, I was not able to learn the Turkish language well. I was exposed to several racist situations. The Turks think we have occupied their country and stolen their jobs, and that the government spends their money on us, which is not at all true. At first I ignored the issue, but then I decided to confront racist assaults in Arabic. Even if the other party did not understand what I was saying, I thought at least they would see my angry and sad expressions.

Like any forcibly displaced person, I went through a period of depression. What hurts most is the separation from my family who chose to stay in Eastern Ghouta and were previously threatened because of my journalistic work. This is what prompted me to work under a pseudonym. Sometimes I face financial difficulties, as I have had hard days without a job, especially after the outbreak of Covid-19, but I am trying to organise my expenses so that I do not reach a stage where I'm unable to provide the basics.

²⁷ RSF, 2019. RSF urges Turkey not to send Syrian refugee journalists back to Syria. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-urges-turkey-not-send-syrian-refugee-journalists-back-syria>

Sometimes I see ads for journalism courses but I can't sign up as the registration is in U.S. dollars, and very expensive. It might reach \$1,500, which is equivalent to about 13,000 Turkish lira. That is a huge amount even for the Turks themselves, and the government does not offer sponsorship.

Anyway, as a mother of two children, I had to continue to work here as a journalist, relying on my five years of experience in Ghouta when I would freelance. I chose this way of life. If I could go back in time, I would choose it again.

During the first year of my stay in Istanbul. I discovered after six months of working with a media organisation that my salary was less than all the employees, although I sometimes worked twice as hard as some of them. I did not have the courage to object because I needed to work. I quit when I found a better job with a better salary.

I've developed my professional skills in Istanbul, as I moved from journalism to radio presenting and social media. The important thing is that I have improved myself and my skills, and I did not surrender to alienation and its difficult circumstances.

Turkey provides the Syrians with only a temporary protection card. There are Syrians registered with the Red Crescent to receive aid, but I did not register because I believe there are many people in worse situations than mine who need assistance more than me.

Some people ask me why I chose Turkey as a country of asylum, and my answer is that I had no other choice. I do not plan on staying. There is no security, nor a professional or financial future. That's what prompted me to contact Reporters Without Borders, to facilitate asylum procedures to France. After waiting for more than a year, I got approval, and I am now preparing to travel within days.

What is the fate of the 700?

By 2020, Turkey was being described by Freedom House as having had one of the worst declines in freedom.²⁸ During the pandemic, journalists were called in for questioning about their stories and social media posts, at times charged by the Cyber Crimes Unit of the Interior Ministry for “making propaganda for a terrorist organisation”, including by “sharing provocative Coronavirus posts”.²⁹

The tide of democratic progress has turned so radically in Turkey that a country that was an appealing safe haven for Arab journalists only a decade ago is now one from which its own native journalists have fled or considered fleeing to avoid imprisonment.^{30,31} Abdullah Bozkurt, former editor-in-chief of the Turkish newspaper *Today's Zaman*, told the United Nations Human Rights Committee: “Exile has become a dream for Turkish journalists, away from the constraints of the government.”³²

These and other human rights criticisms are dismissed by Turkish officials who maintain that they are on track with their “human rights action plan”. Presidential Communications Director Fahrettin Altun told pro-AKP outlet *Daily Sabah* that

²⁸ 2020. Freedom in the World 2020. [online] Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

²⁹ Amnesty International. 2020. Turkey: Stifling free expression during the COVID-19 pandemic. [online] Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/06/turkey-stifling-free-expression-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

³⁰ 2021. Can Dunder: Turkey sentences journalist to 27 years in jail. [online] Available at: <<https://www.dw.com/en/can-dundar-turkey-sentences-journalist-to-27-years-in-jail/a-56037899>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

³¹ PEN International. 2021. Turkey: PEN calls for an end to the harassment of Nurcan Baysal. [online] Available at: <<https://pen-international.org/news/turkey-pen-calls-for-end-to-harassment-nurcan-baysal>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

³² Hizmet News, 2019. Opposition panel speak at UN Panel on Turkey's human rights records. [online]. Available at: <https://hizmetnews.com/24769/opposition-journalists-speak-at-u-n-panel-on-turkeys-human-rights-records/#.YW10gRDMITU>

assessments on Turkey's human rights record were “meaningless” if they “do not properly address the long-standing terrorism threats” inside the country and along its borders.³³ Meanwhile, diplomatic relations between Turkey and Egypt have begun to thaw. In the clearest sign of this, Egyptian stations operating in Turkey were asked to tone down their anti-Sisi rhetoric in March.³⁴ In April, a talk show host from El-Sharq satellite channel – known for his outspoken criticism of Cairo – announced he would take an “unlimited leave”.³⁵ Moataz Matar said he was not forced by the Turkish government or the channel to take leave, but added: “I will come back when I am able to tell the truth on El-Sharq again as I always have,” he added.

The owner of El-Sharq, Ayman Nour, told Al Jazeera that talks with Turkish officials about easing up on criticism of El-Sisi had been civil. “No diktats were issued,” he said. Presidential advisor Yassin Aktay told Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper in London: “Turkey will not arrest anyone or hand anyone over.”³⁶

A Turkish delegation visited Egypt on May 5th this year for two days of talks about mending ties.³⁷

Many Egyptian opposition journalists in Turkey believe all of this is paving the way for their eventual shutdown, possible loss of Turkish settlement status, or – worst-case scenario – extradition to Egypt. If these channels are shut down, the implications for 700 journalists and their families would be monumental.

³³ Daily Sabah. 2021. Turkey will not take unfair critiques seriously: Altun. [online] Available at: <<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-will-not-take-unfair-critiques-seriously-altun>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

³⁴ Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East. 2021. Is Turkey going to crack down Muslim Brotherhood aligned TV in gesture to Egypt?. [online] Available at: <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/turkey-going-crack-down-muslim-brotherhood-aligned-tv-gesture-egypt>> [Accessed 15 October 2021].

³⁵ 2021. Turkish delegation to visit Egypt as Ankara seeks to repair ties. [online] Available at: <<https://thearabweekly.com/turkish-delegation-visit-egypt-ankara-seeks-repair-ties>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

³⁶ Middle East Monitor. 2021. Turkey will not crack down on Egypt's opposition. [online] Available at: <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210320-turkey-will-not-crack-down-on-egypts-opposition/>> [Accessed 15 September 2021].

³⁷ Reuters. 2021. Egypt and Turkey to hold two days of talks in normalisation push. [online] Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypt-turkey-hold-two-days-talks-normalisation-push-2021-05-04/>> [Accessed 15 October 2021].

What happens next will be seen in the months to come, but what is clear is that eight years after the great exodus to Istanbul, any dream that Arab refugee journalists from Egypt, Syria and Libya had of finding progressive values and human rights there are dashed. Many now realise that they were just pawns in a game by several governments to exert their control in the region.

LIBYAN IN EXILE: Salem's story

I had to leave my homeland, and sought refuge in Turkey from 2015 for close to six years now. The Libyan war was the reason for my escape.

My city, Benghazi, was the cradle of the February 2011 revolution. In 2014 – years after the popular uprising and the election – clashes erupted following attempts to impose military control under the leadership of a brigade called Haftar. I was in the media field at that time. One was considered against the military if one didn't support their beliefs. One night, they knocked on our door and arrested me, accusing me of attempting to work with opposing parties.

Miraculously, I was released after a long investigation. I understood that staying there was dangerous, so I fled to another city and obtained a passport, then left for Turkey. I worked with one of the channels, and getting asylum or citizenship papers seemed out of reach. Your fate in Turkey depends on the tourist residency card, and its procedures begin if you stay in Turkey for more than three months.

It is very stressful before every residency renewal appointment, as your survival depends on it, but it does not give you the right to work or the full rights you need for living there. You are forced to earn money for your housing and food, and Arab media outlets often do not have licenses to grant you work permits. You live there as if under artificial respiration, and you are threatened with termination, which happened to me twice – in 2017 and 2019 – and also threatened by possible rejection of the residency papers and getting deported from the country.

You feel like a criminal: you are afraid of confronting the police, you are afraid to speak out in your workplace, you can't voice yourself, and your entitlements are not defined. My return is impossible, and my stay is by compulsion and not by choice.

I was subjected to extortion in my first workplace. We had to protest to get our rights. The second workplace was suddenly shut down without giving us our dues and the people in charge always managed to remind us that we had neither contracts nor work residency. They have been procrastinating for months to give us our dues, and they still haven't.

Here you are just grateful that they grant you the right to live; you have no further human rights aspirations.

I keep immersed in my work and sport to distract me from negative feelings. Eventually the unusual becomes your new usual. I do not regret choosing Turkey.

Conclusion

Refugee journalists need an action plan in place – steps that can be followed before situations deteriorate and it becomes too late to intervene. When political turmoil forces journalists to flee their home countries, international organisations should put pressure on host countries to expedite visas and travel documentation for them to safe havens.

Host countries who invite entire platforms to relocate as a diplomatic strategy – as was the case of Turkey – should be pressured to legalise the employment status of journalists or grant work permits. Moreover, there should be a designated legal entity that journalists can turn to if their employment rights are violated.

There should also be careful monitoring of media organisations that move in this way: they should be required to gain a license to operate in the same way that other networks are required to, and that license should be contingent on the disclosure of financial records, and adherence to fair labour practices. And if a country grants its own journalists press cards, refugee journalists should be afforded the same privileges and protections.

Other measures that can be taken to ensure refugee journalists are kept safe are measures that should be taken for all refugees:

- Provide temporary housing in safe, central areas until they are resettled
- Provide a hotline for reporting threats or mistreatment
- Foster connections with the community by creating spaces to meet and make new acquaintances
- Provide training and internships for those who need to adapt their skill sets or learn new skills to aid their integration into the workforce

Finally, there is something I have found helpful: give refugee journalists the space and time to process what has happened to them, conduct research, write about their experiences, and formulate new plans for the future.