Journalist Fellowship Paper

The “other” side: how identity shapes local coverage of violent conflict

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Preface

This project was prepared by Hagar Shezaf, West Bank correspondent at *Haaretz*. It is the product of a three-month fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by *Haaretz*. Based in Tel Aviv, Shezaf covers mostly settler, Palestinian and military affairs in the West Bank for the paper.

Introduction

Covering violent conflict is one of the most challenging and impactful beats in journalism. The job becomes even more complex when you, the journalist, share an ethnic, religious or national identity with one of the groups involved in the conflict.

In these cases, journalists are often seen by the people they cover either as innately an occupier, oppressor, traitor, friend, or foe. This is the diametrical opposite of the foreign journalist, who parachutes in to cover a conflict from afar and goes back home before it is over. Instead, they must stay on, the realities of their personal lives mixing with those they report about. The multifaceted position of covering a conflict from within is at the centre of this paper.

Drawing from my own experience as an Israeli journalist who covers the Occupied West Bank, I am acutely aware of how these dynamics influence even the most routine aspects of my job. At the centre of my project stand questions that I grapple with personally.

How do journalists cover conflict critically when their identities intersect with conflict lines? How, if at all, do they attempt to cover "the other side" of that conflict? How does their identity play out in their reporting? In what ways does it help or restrict their ability to do the work they believe should be done? How do they approach sources of different kinds? How does being part of the fabric of their own society affect them, both personally and professionally? And what sort of professional relations, if any, do journalists from opposite sides of a conflict have?

To begin to answer these questions, I interviewed six journalists covering conflict within their own countries: Turkey (including ethnic Turkish and Kurdish journalists) and India (including Kashmiri and Indian journalists). To protect their safety, most interviewees' identities will remain anonymous, with pseudonyms used.

Each journalist I interviewed is engaged in accountability-seeking journalism, often at great personal cost, including facing travel bans, imprisonment, or dismissal from their jobs. Many have transitioned from mainstream media to alternative or international outlets due to these pressures.

They also all linked the challenge of critical conflict reportage to the broader issue of diminishing press freedom and expression in their countries. In both countries,

journalists described how the conflict itself is being harnessed as a means to silence the media and other critical voices.

The interviews focused on the intersection of journalists' national, ethnic or religious identity and their journalistic work, especially in covering the "other side" of conflict. Key themes include how Turkish journalists cover Kurdish issues and vice versa, how they engage with sources who might view them as enemies, the challenges faced by Kashmiri reporters covering Indian affairs and vice versa, and the negotiation of contested terminologies and narratives within newsrooms.

The journalists I spoke to for this paper represent different groups within their respective violent conflicts. In both India and Turkey, the conflict is or was internal (with a broader geopolitical context), with both sides being citizens of the same country. This dynamic often leads to disenfranchisement and discrimination within the newsroom, influencing the career decisions of Kurdish and Kashmiri journalists. The underlying tension raises questions about solidarity between journalists from hegemonic and minoritised groups, that are often more forcefully targeted and criminalised by the state.

After providing background on both conflicts and surveying the current state of freedom of expression and press in Turkey and India, I will delve into the insights shared by my interviewees, focusing on issues of access, terminology, sources, newsroom dynamics, and solidarity.

A brief overview of conflict and media restrictions in India and Turkey

India & Kashmir

In 1947, when India and Pakistan became separate states, both claimed the territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Under the Indian constitution, Jammu and Kashmir was granted a special autonomous status as a state. Since the late eighties, Kashmir, which is predominantly Muslim, has had an armed movement seeking to separate from India.

In 2019, the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi revoked Kashmir's special autonomous status. This has had enormous effects on press freedom in Kashmir and journalistic coverage of the region. Kashmiri journalists face detention, bans on travel out of India, intimidation and violence. The new restrictions and attacks on Kashmiri reporters and local media furthered the already prevailing trend in Indian media of aligning Kashmir's portrayal with the government's stance.[1]

New and old laws provide the legal framework which allow for the persecution of media in India in general and Kashmir specifically. In 2020, the local government introduced a new media policy, set to "thwart misinformation and fake news". The new policy meant any media organisation or person could face legal and criminal proceedings for spreading what the authorities deemed as fake news. In 2023, the Indian government introduced new amendments to its information technology (IT) rules, which introduced a governmental fact check unit tasked with identifying fake news online regarding the government. Older laws used to detain journalists are the anti-terror law called the Unlawful Activities Act (1967) as well as the Public Safety Act, which allows for a detention without trial.

According to the 2023 prison census of the Committee to Protect Journalists, seven journalists were in prison in India as of December 2023. [2] Four of them were from Jammu and Kashmir and five out of the total were charged under the unlawful activities act. Some of the journalists who cover Kashmir were accused of having contacts with separatist groups.

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[1] Joseph, T., 2000. Kashmir, human rights, and the Indian press. Contemporary South Asia, 9(1), pp.41-55.

[2] Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023. Data on Imprisoned Journalists in India, 2023. Available at: https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2023/?status=Imprisoned&cc_fips%5B%5D=IN&start_year=2023&end_year=2023&group_by=location

Turkey & its Kurdish regions

In Turkey, conflict between Kurdish separatist groups in the southeastern regions and state forces has been ongoing since the late 1970s. The Kurds are an ethnic group native to the Kurdistan region, which is divided between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In today's Turkey, large Kurdish communities live in different parts of the country, including in large cities such as Istanbul. Academic research into the press coverage of Kurds in Turkish mainstream media shows that, much like Kashmir, they too suffer from negative coverage in line with the government's approach, mostly framed through the terrorism lens.[3]

For years, Turkish journalists and critical media have faced sustained government attacks, including the forced closure of opposition outlets, investigations, and disciplinary measures such as tax audits and the withholding government tenders.[4] The situation worsened dramatically following the 2016 attempted coup, after which outlets that had suspected links to Fethullah Gülen, as well as Kurdish media outlets, were shut down using emergency legislation.

Among the laws used to persecute journalists in Turkey in general, and Kurdish journalists specifically, are the Anti-Terrorism Law, which criminalises "terrorism propaganda", as well as article 301 which criminalises "insulting Turkishness".[5] In October 2022, Turkey passed a new disinformation law, and just two months later, the first Turkish journalist was put in detention under the criminal offense of "publicly spreading disinformation".

Kurdish journalists and those working in Kurdish media are the most affected by state repression. Of the 13 Turkish journalists who were imprisoned at the end of 2023, according to the prison census by the Committee to Protect Journalists, six were working in pro-Kurdish media.[6] Many of those were detained on terror-related charges and were accused of ties to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

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[3] Atay, A.D. and İrvan, S., 2021. An analysis of the representation of the 'Solution Process' in the Turkish press. *Turkish Studies*, 22(1), pp.98-119. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2020.1743185.

[4] Algan, E., 2019. Practicing peace journalism in a time of declining media freedoms: The 'News Watch Turkey' initiative as activist alternative journalism. In: Journalism 'A Peacekeeping Agent' at the Time of Conflict. 1st ed. Leiden: BRILL, pp.40-55

[5] Michaelson, R. and agencies, 2022. Turkey passes new 'disinformation' law that could jail journalists for three years. *The Guardian*, 13 October. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/13/turkey-new-disinformation-law-could-jail-journalists-for-3-years

[6] Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023. Data on imprisoned journalists in Turkey, 2023. Available at: https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2023/?status=Imprisoned&cc_fips%5B%5D=TU&cc_fips%5B%5D=AE&start_year=2023&end_year=2023&group_by=location

Though this paper will mostly deal with coverage of the Kurdish conflict in the context of Turkey, I will also briefly touch upon the Armenian-Turkish question. This will revolve around the Turkish lack of recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915-1916 and attempts to report on its societal consequences.

The role of identity in source engagement

Cultivating sources always requires the fostering of trust, and may include a negotiation of conditions for an interview. People are often reluctant to engage with journalists at all, a tendency that can be exacerbated by declining trust in the media and decreasing levels of freedom of speech.[7, 8] In the context of conflict, the risks interviewees take when agreeing to an interview – especially if they are from a non-hegemonic group or hold an oppositional view – are extremely high.

The situation becomes even more complex when the journalists' national, ethnic or religious identity is perceived as adversarial by the people they try to interview or engage with. "It happens in almost every situation, that my Kashmiri and Muslim identity comes up," said Tejas*, a Kashmiri journalist who covers national Indian news for international outlets.[9] "It can be as small as a story about air conditioners in Delhi during the heatwave; people suddenly point out that, 'Oh, you look like a Kashmiri.' And at times, that has changed the mood".

Among ways in which journalists said they were identified as belonging to "the other group" by interviewees were their looks, their name or the level of fluency in the local language. "No matter what [the subject of] reporting, there's always a degree of suspicion and scepticism," Tejas added.

Preeti*, an Indian journalist who covers Kashmir and has worked for national media, spoke of sources' reluctance to speak with Indian outlets, a reticence rooted in past misrepresentation of Kashmiris. "After a point, people got really mad at the national press, because they said, 'You don't listen to us, you just spread one kind of narrative. You call us terrorists.' And so national media was not welcome in many places," she said.

The reactions of interviewees described in these two instances reflect broader dynamics. Whereas the Kashmiri reporter described the ways in which prejudice against Kashmiris in general Indian society influences his ability to conduct interviews, the Indian reporter described how minority portrayal in the national media reflects back on her, regardless of her personal record of work.

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[7] Statista, 2023. Media trust worldwide in 2023, by country. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/683336/media-trust-worldwide/

[8] Applebaum, A., 2023. Evidence is growing that free speech is declining. Foreign Policy, 4 December. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/04/evidence-is-growing-that-free-speech-is-declining/

[9] All pseudonyms will be marked with an asterisk when appearing for the first time.

The way in which a journalist's social identity weighs on their interaction with the subjects they report on is very apparent in Turkish journalist Ece Temelkuran's book, *Deep Mountain*. In it, she describes her reporting in Armenian communities in Armenia and the diaspora. In one encounter at a local bar in Yerevan, she describes the owner's reaction when she said she was from Istanbul (paraphrased):[10]

> *"Did you mean to say Constantinople?" he asks. And then adds, "You're a Turk, aren't you?". After a short exchange, he says, "Unless you recognise the genocide, please get out of my bar!"*

In another instance, she describes meeting a group of Armenian students. In the course of a friendly conversation, she describes summoning the courage to ask a sensitive question: "Don't you ever get tired of the way the 'genocide issue' is always bearing down on you?". The question causes a change in the mood, as she notices a "cloud of suspicion" on their faces. The conversation comes to an end.

More than a decade later, in our interview about that encounter and her ability to challenge sources with tough questions while being perceived as "the other", Temelkuran said she felt the positionality of the storyteller had become overblown. "You are there as a human being with rather high standards of conscientiousness, and you carry the responsibility of telling the truth – for the history for future generations," she said.

She also draws a distinction between what interviewees perceive her as, and the personal. "I didn't take anything personally. People said horrible things to me, so what? I mean, they're talking to a Turkish woman, not me," she added. "I think that in order to tell a story, you have to be nobody anyway. And I like being that nobody. It's easier for me, because I don't have to get angry."

In an attempt to overcome suspicion or mistrust from interviewees, some journalists described how they emphasise or conceal parts of their identity. Elif*, a Turkish reporter who worked in mainstream Turkish media in the past but recently moved to international media, said that when reporting from Kurdish regions, she brings up her family's origin. "My father is from a southeastern province. So I start with small talk and tell them that my family is from there, and then they start talking to me,"

10 Temelkuran, 45.

she said. Preeti noted that being from a state in India perceived to have a more secular government helps. “When I say I’m from there, people tend to relax a bit,” she said.

Facing prejudice because of his Kashmiri identity, Tejas does exactly the opposite. “The one unique advantage I have is that my name is not a Kashmiri or Muslim name, it’s usually Hindu,” he said. “To be honest, half the time I get away with just using my first name and trying to pretend at times that I’m not a Kashmiri Muslim.” Other times, he said he tries to make the case of his distance from the region. “I try to emphasise that I have been living in Delhi for a long time and I do not have that close association with Kashmir. I kind of portray as if I’m ignorant about things happening in Kashmir,” he added.

One of the most effective ways to smooth the approach with suspicious sources is by contacting them through a common and trusted acquaintance. “I have my own connections, so people let them know that I’m going to call them,” said Elif, adding that the fact she has many years of experience in the region helped her gain recognition as a “friendly journalist”. Preeti noted the importance of local colleagues in accessing sources. “I think probably the single most important thing was that I went with Kashmiri journalists and reporters,” she said. “I owe them a lot because I wouldn’t have been able to speak to a lot of people if I didn’t go with them,” she said.

All of the journalists interviewed had a special focus in reporting on human rights abuses in the context of the conflict. In accordance with that, they all spoke of their careful reporting when covering statements from the state’s armed forces.

Temelkuran gleaned a nuanced view of armed conflict coverage from her experience covering the Kurdish issue. “Nobody is innocent in this kind of armed conflict,” she said, referring to the Kurdish militant groups. “You very quickly understand that there are people who are trying to manipulate you, to make you [part of] their propaganda machine. Being a young girl from Izmir [a large city in Turkey considered to be liberal], I think I might have given the idea that I’m an easy target for that,” she said of her early years writing about the Kurdish issue.

Protecting sources and self-censorship

The crackdown on freedom of expression both in India and Turkey means that both sources and journalists face extremely high risks when publishing or being quoted on Kashmiri and Kurdish issues, especially if they belong to minority communities. This, in turn, shapes how journalists protect their sources and what they might choose to leave out of their publications, fearing for their safety.

“During interviews, sometimes people will say stuff which could incriminate them and make them go to jail,” said Irfan Aktan, a Kurdish journalist who works for alternative media outlets and has authored a number of books. “So, during the writing process I will call them up and say, ‘Look, you have said this sentence; shall we transform it into something else? Shall we revise or modify it a little bit?’” Among the words or phrases that he considers dangerous for interviewees to use are "state terror", "Kurdistan", and anything that can be perceived as an insult to Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Elif said that people in the Kurdish regions rarely go on record these days, let alone agree to be photographed, unless they are well-known activists or politicians. “I won’t pressure them, because the threat is too real,” she said.

Preeti, who covered Kashmir both before and after the 2019 revocation of special status, noted that the mood has changed. People’s motivation to talk to journalists and their willingness to go on record have diminished, with many agreeing to interviews only under the condition of anonymity. She said: “I’m really scared these days about revealing the identity of sources, so I’ve been checking and double checking: ‘Can I quote you; is this OK?’”

She added that she sometimes assesses whether something a source said is worth the risk of publishing. “Why write a certain line? If someone is very pro-Pakistan and I quote that, I will get us both into trouble. […] It’s one thing to be aggrieved about human rights violations or have complaints about the Indian government; it’s another thing to say, ‘This person is pro-Pakistan’,” she said. “It’s hard. Like, if they are, they are. And I guess in some instances you do have to report it, but it’s tricky.”

She mentioned an instance where an outlet she worked for published stories about excesses by armed forces in Kashmir. “We thought we had to report on this. It was very much the era of thinking more light is better,” she said. After publication, however, they became suspicious that their reporting had drawn unwelcome

attention to the families and villages concerned. As a result, they decided to stop their reporting. “You just choose not to do certain stories because it’s too dangerous for your sources,” she concluded.

When discussing protective measures, Aktan recalled an incident when he was detained in Ankara, which changed how he operated. It was around the beginning of the 2000s while writing for Bianet, a Swedish-funded news agency focused on human rights in Turkey. “The police found my notebook and asked about the notes there. Among them, things about the police, aggravation, incidents with students… They threatened that the notes I took would keep me in jail for a long time,” he said. “So once I was out, I got into the habit of taking notes and cutting up the paper and throwing them away. I’ve also destroyed my computers.”

Aktan spoke of that as a form of self-censorship, a theme that bothered Tejas too. “Self-censorship is the biggest issue we are facing. Honestly, there are stories that are important that should be reported, but I’m not reporting simply because they’re too dangerous,” Tejas said. He specifically mentioned stories about Kashmir but also stories from mainland India, such as inter-communal clashes and riots, and the work of Indian law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

A war of words

Journalists reporting on conflicts and engaging with affected communities often find themselves needing to act as bridge between their editors, the mainstream narrative and the counter-narrative. Interviewees for this project described having to fight over terminology and the way stories were framed, especially when they worked in mainstream media. For some, that internal newsroom battle had to do with their desire to build long-term relationships with affected communities or official sources.

Upon returning from Diyarbakir, where Temelkuran reported on Kurdish children throwing stones at police, she found a different kind of fight lay ahead of her. She recalled: "I went to the newspaper, and the editor-in-chief proposed we give it the title, *Children at the crossroads of terror*. I remember crying, like, how can you allude to the idea that these kids are deciding to be terrorists or not be terrorists?" Her exhaustion following the reporting assignment made the argument particularly emotional. Thanks to her insistence, the article was eventually published under a different headline.

The question of how to describe militants engaged in warfare against the state's official army was a major point of friction between journalists, their newsrooms, and the communities they covered. While the journalists interviewed said that mainstream newsrooms preferred to use the word "terrorists", families of slain militants would sometimes ask journalists to call them "rebels" or "fighters". "Several times, particularly while working for national Indian press, they would not agree to change the word 'terrorist' to 'militant'," said Tejas. "I really felt bad about it and, ultimately, these were the reasons I quit that job. And I remember at times, I would ask them to not write my byline on my story," he added.

The journalists noted that the use of the word "terrorist" changed according to the general political atmosphere. Preeti described working for an outlet where they would use the word "militant", but following a big attack that claimed the lives of Indian soldiers, one of the editors wanted to start using the word terrorists instead. She pushed back: "I said, 'No, you can't change your terminology according to what actions you approve or disapprove of!'"

While that attempt for an editorial change may have been rooted in an emotional reaction, in some instances a change in terminology is the result of a top-down political development. Elif said that during her time working for a mainstream

Turkish outlet, while peace talks were held between the government and the Kurdish PKK, they would use the terms "armed organisation" or simply "PKK organisation" in their reporting. However, she noted, once the peace process fell apart, news outlets went back to calling them "terrorists" or even "baby killers", and went as far as framing Kurds who were not involved in militancy at all as engaged in terrorism.

In a 2019 study, researchers Ayça Demet Atay and Süleyman İrvan found that the Turkish media representation of the Kurds prior to the peace process was dominated by reports of violence, and information provided by Turkish state authorities was presented as fact.[11] Portrayal of the Kurdish issue changed during the peace process, with most outlets adopting more humanising coverage, and refraining from using terms like "baby killer" or "traitor" to describe Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan. However, once the process has collapsed the coverage reverted back to framing Kurds as terrorists. The study concludes that the pro-peace attitude during the height of the peace process did not stem from an independent journalistic initiative, but was instead a form of "state-imposed peace journalism".

Journalists also described the ways in which armed forces would try to get their own terminology across and frame their actions in the context of the conflict. For example, Elif mentioned that the Turkish army would never say that it "killed" PKK militants, but would rather say that they were "neutralised". In Kashmir, Akash and Suhail*, a journalist who used to work in mainstream Indian media, said that the army or police would try to demand journalists report militants were killed in an "encounter", even when the circumstances of the events were unclear.

The need to maintain working relations with armed forces also led some independent outlets to change their language. Preeti mentioned one instance in which a newsroom she worked in decided to stop using the word "resistance" when referring to Kashmir. On the other hand, she said she was very concerned with the way a Kashmiri readership would react to their stories and choices of words whenever they wrote about the region. "One word here or there would be picked up and analysed and the whole story can be misread," she said.

In the Kashmiri context, journalists described what became a major point of friction with editors following the 2019 decision to revoke the autonomous status of the region. Prior to that, the journalists said, national and especially international

[11] Atay, A. D. and İrvan, S. (2020) 'An analysis of the representation of the 'Solution Process' in the Turkish press', Turkish Studies, 22(1), pp. 98–119. doi: 10.1080/14683849.2020.1743185.

media would refer to the region as Indian-administered Kashmir. But following the change, Indian outlets started referring to it simply as "Jammu and Kashmir". Tejas was particularly surprised when an international outlet he freelanced with changed his dateline to reflect India's decision. "I had an argument with them. My point was that this was a unilateral decision by India that doesn't change the international context of the conflict," he recounted. He said he explained to his editors that he thought the previous terminology was more neutral and described correctly a region divided between India, Pakistan and China. "They did not agree to change it and I really did not feel good about it. Whenever I'm writing a Kashmir story for them [now] I'm very cautious, I try not to take my stories there."

“The other”: challenges of marginalised identity in journalism

Kurdish and Kashmiri journalists described the many ways in which state-entrenched discrimination in the field and in the newsroom shaped their work and career trajectories.

Being perceived by the state as a threat sometimes meant journalists were simply barred from scenes of reporting. Tejas, for example, said he was blocked from accessing an area near the India-Pakistan border, even though he had received permission from the military to report from there. “I took a two-hour flight, and when I arrived, I met an officer who realised I was Kashmiri by the way I look,” he said. The first question the officer asked, he recounted, was where in Kashmir was he from. “Despite the fact that we had been in touch for three months on the story, he just said we cannot do it. He gave some random reasons, but it was very apparent it was just because of my Kashmiri identity,” he said. He eventually reported the story, but only after waiting six months to coordinate a visit to a different location.

Aktan said officials never agree to talk to him in his capacity as a journalist, which is partially why he focuses on alternative sources from marginalised communities. To get information from the government itself, he said, he sometimes solicits help from Turkish friends who are less critical of the government and better situated to get information from them.

Aktan’s own traumatic experience with the Turkish security forces shaped his career choices. “While I was doing street journalism, I was harassed by the police – especially undercover police,” he said of his early years in journalism, while he was a university student. He said policemen would grab him, ask for his ID and detect that he was Kurdish from his address or his accent. “I always had more inclination to be criminalised in the eyes of the police, so I was a little fed up with it and gradually moved away from the field,” he said.

Suhail said Kashmiri journalists face difficulties gaining access to government offices or institutions. “If you’re covering parliament, for example, and you are covering central ministries, you need a special card to do that,” he said. “And when that selection happens and those cards are given, if you’re a Kashmiri, it’ll be difficult to get.” In turn, that could mean lost opportunities for promotion or covering prestigious beats, he said. “If you’re in a mainstream newsroom, they won’t

put you on that beat to begin with," he said. "So a kind of filtering happens at that level. It becomes kind of a self-fulfilling loop." Few Kashmiris reach the higher ranks within Indian newsrooms, he said. The kind of journalism they do is often restricted by their inability to do source-based reporting on the government.

In mainstream newsrooms, the Kashmiri journalists said, they felt they had to deal with the burden of a stigma towards them. "We have this label: these are activists, activist-journalists," Suhail said. "Even when you are reporting an Indian story which has nothing to do with Kashmir, you know, a crime story in Mumbai, it's, 'Oh, don't do activist-y stuff; this is not Kashmir'. You get to hear these things all the time in newsrooms," he said. Tejas agreed and added that discrimination and unfair representation in coverage sometimes push Kashmiri journalists to precarious employment. "I personally do not want to work in Indian mainstream press because I will be discriminated against there and I will not be able to cover things objectively as they should be. And it's not just me; most of my colleagues prefer to go on freelancing, without stable jobs," he said.

Journalists' solidarity across conflict lines

Generally speaking, journalists in India and Turkey said they maintained friendly relations with journalists from "the other side". Some interviewees reported seeking each other's help in the field, including in accessing sources and places of journalistic interest. Though a separate Kurdish and Kashmiri media landscape exists in both countries, journalists from these groups are often employed in the same newsrooms.

While journalists in both countries suffer persecution by the state, Kashmiri and Kurdish journalists are more frequently targeted and their persecution often involves labelling them and their work as aiding militant separatists. When that happened, journalists said they found little solidarity from their colleagues in the mainstream media.

"There are clear distinctions between Turkish and Kurdish journalists," said Aktan. "If a Turkish journalist is imprisoned, it's a scandal. But if a Kurdish journalist is in prison it's just normal – a daily thing." He attributed that to two factors. First, the fact that journalists in mainstream media would generally side with the government: "People are a little bit reluctant to show support, because in the back of their mind they say, 'Maybe he's guilty after all?'" Secondly, he thought that the stakes have become too high for Turkish journalists to support their Kurdish colleagues. "The worst thing that can happen to a Turkish person is to show solidarity with Kurdish people and media. Journalists who showed solidarity were imprisoned. The system tells you that you will be punished if you show solidarity."

Elif provided a different explanation. In her experience, Kurdish and Turkish media outlets are distinct from one another in terms of priorities, agenda, and political inclination, which results in a lack of communication and acquaintance between the two groups of journalists. "The Kurdish media is very Kurdish," she said. "I also don't like their discourse all the time because when you're extreme, you're extreme," she said, adding that she does value their work, especially in covering local events in places that she cannot reach.

The different agenda of the media spheres, she said, meant reporters in the Kurdish and Turkish press would not necessarily meet. "If there is a press conference about human rights violations in Şirnak [a Kurdish-majority region in Turkey], none of the Turkish media would go to that. You will only see marginal outlets and Kurdish reporters," she said. "So there is a bubble; they don't know each other." She added

that in events that the national media would deem important – such as a statement to the media by the president – Kurdish media would rarely be present because they would typically not be allowed in. Its reporters would often not even be granted press cards necessary to gain access.

The sense of a general lack of solidarity from colleagues in the hegemonic group was also apparent in the Indian context. "Most of the journalists in India, their responses are disappointing," Tejas said, referring to reactions to travel bans and detentions faced by Kashmiri journalists. "I've found that most mainstream Indian journalists share the same view as the government of India towards Kashmiris."

Suhail did mention a few independent or left-wing outlets that would support Kashmiri journalists and publish news about their mistreatment, such as Wire, Scroll and Caravan. Other media-aligned groups showing support were journalists' organisations such as Digi Pub, a foundation formed by digital media organisations, and the Press Club of India. However, Suhail noted that even when journalists' organisations voiced their concern, it did not have an effect on the authorities due to the declining power of the media. "If something happens, they come up with statements but that voice is not as solid or influential as it used to be," he said. "That is partly the fault of the media, because they have become so servile. Nobody bothers with what they are saying. The only time [the authorities] kind of take notice is if the international media covers it."

Though Aktan provided a grim assessment of the present state of journalistic solidarity in Turkey, he did remember a time not too long ago when a meaningful action took place. In 2016, following months of siege on Kurdish towns and clashes between Kurdish militants and Turkish government forces, an initiative called "News Watch" was launched by journalists from the Western part of the country that sought to support Kurdish journalists in the affected areas. "It started after a photo was released where a policeman was pointing a pistol to the head of a journalist who lived there," said Aktan. In the course of the initiative, 68 journalists from the Western part of the country were hosted by 18 local newsrooms.[12] A different group of journalists would be hosted every week with the stated aim to "defend [the Kurdish journalists'] right to work freely and safely and the publics' right to know."[13] Most of the participants were either from independent media or freelance journalists.

12 Algan, "Practicing Peace Journalism in a Time of Declining Media Freedoms: The 'News Watch Turkey' Initiative as Activist Alternative Journalism."
13 "News-Watch," Haber Nöbeti (blog), n.d.

Those participating in the project sought to write stories about Kurdish citizens impacted by the crackdown, and about the conditions in which local journalists worked, including the limits to their freedom of expression. Their stories about the latter included reporting about harassment, threats, arrests and even direct targeting by snipers.[14]

Aside from News Watch, which went on the win the Günter Wallraff Critical Journalism Award, Aktan also mentioned another form of solidarity, or rather a symbiotic relationship: in the past, he said, Kurdish journalists would pass on tips and stories to journalists who worked in the Turkish media if they feared that publishing them under their own name would endanger them. However, he claimed that this does not happen often today. Asked why he thinks that is the case, he simply answered: "There is no Turkish media to publish it."

The question of relationships between journalists across conflict lines has received some scholarly attention in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the Israeli-Palestine context, unlike those discussed above, the legal inequality faced by Palestinian journalists is far more striking: while Israelis are citizens, Palestinians in the West Bank are under military rule.[15] That generally means that – unlike in Turkey and India – Palestinians who are not resident or citizens of Israel seldom work in the same newsrooms as Israelis. Another important factor in the Israeli Palestinian context is that while the movement of Israeli reporters is generally not restricted in the West Bank, Palestinian journalists cannot enter Israel unless a permit is provided by the Israeli military.

A 2019 paper that looked into the way in which reporters from Israel-Palestine speak of their relationships showed that sometimes even the mere fact of having a relationship can be highly controversial.[16,17] While Israeli journalists described having personal and professional relations with Palestinian journalists, Palestinian journalists said no such relationships exist and that they oppose them.

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14 Algan, "Practicing Peace Journalism in a Time of Declining Media Freedoms: The 'News Watch Turkey' Initiative as Activist Alternative Journalism."

15 Palestinian journalists also include Palestinian citizens of Israel, as well as residents of the Gaza strip, where Israeli occupation manifested in a different legal framework and practices to that of West Bank even before the beginning of the current war .

16 Yonatan Gonen and Abit Hoxha, "Interactions between Journalists Located in Different Sides of a Conflict: A Comparative Study of Two Conflict Zones," Journalism Studies (London, England) 20, no. 16 (2019): 2495–2512.

17 The research compared these two groups and their relationships to the way reporters from Kosovo and Serbia, in which conflict ceased, spoke of their relationships.

Some of the Palestinian journalists further said they view Israeli journalists as part of the occupying entity, no different to soldiers. They also cited resolutions made by the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate which called on them to avoid cooperation with Israeli journalists. The Israeli journalists, however, were mostly quoted describing how these relationships served them professionally: when working in the West Bank, they said, Palestinian journalists would help them access sources and at times would protect them if needed. They also said that their colleagues would pass them on tips for stories that they could not publish themselves in the Palestinian media, including reports that were critical towards the Palestinian Authority.

Earlier research, published in 1996 by the Palestinian scholar Orayb A. Najjar, discussed the lack of solidarity of Israeli journalists towards their Palestinian colleagues in the 1980s.[18] At the time, according to the article, the Israeli military would limit some Palestinian journalists' movement by placing them under town arrests. Only following an appeal by the Norwegian Journalists' Association, which reminded Israeli journalists that as members of the International Federation of Journalists they are committed to defending the human rights of journalists, did Israeli journalists visit three Palestinian editors under town arrest. One Palestinian journalist, Awad Abdel Fattah, accused Israeli journalists "liberal and rightist alike" of being "completely passive towards the suppression of free press in the occupied territories".[19]

These two academic articles echoed two points made by journalists in the Turkish and Indian context: first, much like the Israeli journalists, Turkish and Indian reporters who covered Kashmir or Kurdistan said they relied on local colleagues and friends to help them gain access to sources and locations – and that they needed them as so-called outsiders, especially in more heated times. Secondly, both my interviewees and the research noted the scarcity of solidarity and even suspicion towards colleagues accused by the government and targeted by anti-terror laws.

18 Orayb A. Najjar, "From Enemies to 'Colleagues': Relations between Palestinian Journalists and Israeli West Bank Beat Reporters, 1967-1994," Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands) 55, no. 2 (1996): 113–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/001654929605500203.
19 Ibid

Targeted and isolated: the burden of conflict reporting

Journalists are no strangers to smear campaigns in response to critical reporting that holds the powerful to account. In the case of those who cover conflict, smear tactics may originate from their own government, or from political or military actors from "the other side". If a journalist is critical towards his own society, harsh sentiments can at times come from one's own family.

"When you're trying to be in the middle telling the story and you feel responsible only to the story, that's a very lonely place," said Temelkuran. "Unfortunately, these are the people targeted the most, because they are targeted by both sides."

Temelkuran, who has written extensively about the Kurdish as well as the Armenian issue throughout the years, was fired from her position as a columnist in the newspaper *Habertürk* following the publication of columns about the Turkish military's killing of 35 Kurdish civilians in the Uludere district in 2011. She now resides in Germany. Also in Turkey, Aktan was sentenced to 15 months in prison for "producing terrorist propaganda" following an article he wrote in which he quoted PKK members and PKK-sympathetic media.[20] Following a public outcry, he said he eventually did not have to serve the time he was sentenced to, but had to declare that he would refrain from repeating his so-called "crime" for five years.

In India, Tejas is now unable to leave the country after he was subjected to a travel ban, similarly to other Kashmiri journalists. The most extreme smear campaign he said he was subjected to took place in a local Kashmiri newspaper. In July 2022, *Rising Kashmir* ran an article that claimed he and other journalists were supported by Pakistan, and that they were supporting violence and terrorism.[21] That article was signed by a pseudonym, which the journalist believes to be connected to the Indian military. "It's a mainstream Kashmiri paper that goes to every household, so it was a weird thing that my relatives are suddenly calling me and asking, 'Why is there a huge article against you?' And ordinary people do not understand – they take the word of a newspaper as the gospel truth," he said. Following the publication, he left Kashmir. "It's not only about my government being after me; they put the word out

[20] "CPJ Calls for Turkey to Overturn Journalist's 15-Month Sentence," Committee to Protect Journalists (blog), September 6, 2010, https://cpj.org/2010/06/cpj-calls-for-turkey-to-overturn-journalists-15-mo/.
21 Majeed Ahmad, "Vultures of Single Narrative Feasting on Misery," Web Archive, Originally Published in Rising Kashmir (blog), July 7, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220706200408/https:/www.risingkashmir.com/Vultures-of-Single-Narrative-Feasting-on-Misery-110745.

that this person is not a real journalist, he is something else," he said. "So my family got really disturbed by that."

Social media and especially Twitter were, unsurprisingly, weaponised against journalists too. Tejas said this particularly acute following 2019, when his stories on Kashmir would be the target of online harassment and his photos and personal information began circulating. "I stopped posting any opinions on Twitter and I also try to avoid sharing my stories now. I don't want any kind of attention on Twitter because it becomes very disturbing given how your personal information is revealed," he said.

Preeti also witnessed attempts to associate journalists who covered Kashmir with terrorism. "Especially during the 2016 [Kashmir] protests, I got trolled a lot on social media mainly by the national reading public. 'Why are you a terrorist sympathiser' and violent and sexual threats," she said. Although her immediate family supports her work, she did at times receive comments from extended members of family such as, "Have you gone to Kashmir and become radicalised?"

The sense of isolation then develops from multiple directions: family, society at large, or government attacks. This was apparent in Aktan's experience. "To Turkish authorities, I'm a terrorist. To Kurdish nationalists, a lefty, and to the Turkish left wing, a Kurdish nationalist. For some, because my grandmother was Jewish, I am pro-Israeli [and] to Islamists, an atheist," he said. "So there is always demonisation and isolation."

The isolating nature of reporting on both sides of a conflict is something Temelkuran touched upon too. "Of course, the obvious problem is the Turkish establishment telling you, 'How dare you do these things, how dare you talk to them and talk about them," she said of her reporting on Kurds. But there was another aspect too. "I wrote about the Kurdish issue for about 20 years on and off. And then I lost my job due to two articles I wrote about the Kurdish issue and against Erdogan," she said. "But then, I wasn't supported by Kurdish politics because, previously, I had criticised the peace process that they were involved in," she said. She said that during the years of the peace process between Erdogan and the PKK she criticised the process' lack of transparency. "So my approach was like, we have to include the Turkish people and the Kurdish people. Otherwise, it's going to get really impossible, which eventually proved to be true. But because I criticised the peace process, Kurdish politics decided that I was a traitor."

Conclusion

The journalists I interviewed for this research paper revealed the myriad questions and challenges that stem from covering a conflict from within. It became apparent to me that identity can play different roles and have varying meanings for journalists' careers, body of work, and wellbeing, and that too is destined to shift and change over time.

The power balance within a conflict is often reflected in the relationships between journalists across conflict lines as well as in the newsrooms. At the same time, a general decline of freedom of speech and democracy in both countries makes building solidarity networks between journalists from different groups even more challenging. The decline of critical media has also made journalists more inclined to toe the government line, even when it came to criminalising their peers.

The ability to amplify the voices and stories of victimised groups is further restricted by the decline in press freedom, forcing even the most dedicated and critical journalists to resort to self-censorship or censorship of their sources in the face of concrete danger. My interviewees were very aware of that, and were concerned about how mitigating risks might further diminish freedom of expression.

The specific task of covering "the other side", which was the initial subject of my research, emerged as an area where identities were either emphasised or downplayed, and where personal contacts, built during the course of long-term fieldwork, proved most useful.

A major challenge was accurately representing the "other" in the right terms and words. The journalists' experiences showed that their own beliefs, along with their desire to maintain good relations with sources, made this task extremely important. A lack of support in the face of attack on the journalists themselves – be it from their own society, their colleagues or the subjects of their reporting – affected the journalists' wellbeing and had very real consequences in their personal and professional lives.

The dilemmas and hardships that come with this territory call for a more honest and collaborative discussion among journalists – one that is rarely possible in the heated debates that surround conflicts. The insights shared here may offer a starting point for conversations of this kind.