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ANA MARIA LUCA

April 4, 2013

Journalists, as targets



A pro-regime Syrian businessman based in Kuwait **offered** a \$142,000 USD bounty for anyone who captures *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* news correspondents inside Syria.

Fahim Sadeq made the statement on Syrian state TV: “Their media tells lies, while our media tells the truth,” Sadeq said. “I announce this in my name: any Syrian citizen who captures a reporter from *Al Arabiya* or *Al Jazeera* and hands them over to Syrian security forces, will get 10 million liras [around \$142,000 USD] from me,” he said.

According to media freedom organizations as well as security experts, initiatives like Sadeq’s make covering the Syrian conflict even riskier for journalists. Dozens of journalists who covered the Syrian conflict on the ground have been killed, arrested, kidnapped, or simply gone missing since the beginning of the uprising in 2011. According to **Reporters without Borders**, the kidnapping rates of both foreign and Syrian journalists by different factions in Syria have become alarming. The whereabouts of four foreign journalists, who went missing in 2012, are still unknown, while Syrian authorities are still holding 36 journalists and citizen-journalists captive.

Ayman Mhanna, executive director of the **Samir Kassir Eyes media freedom organization** in Beirut, told NOW that there are an increasing number of foreign freelance journalists who risk everything by going to cover the Syrian war completely unprepared, seeing it as a golden opportunity to make a name for themselves. He says

most international media outlets prefer to employ freelancers rather than sending their employees, in order to reduce costs.

“Many of the young freelancers lack experience and they can’t protect themselves when it comes to three risks: bombardments by the regime, kidnappings by the regime’s militias and intelligence services, and kidnappings by the Islamists,” Mhanna said. “There is also a risk in dealing with local inexperienced fixers who are putting them in harm’s way just to make more money. There have been even cases when fixers were actually involved in mafias and gangster work,” he pointed out.

There are little-known aspects of how journalists are treated in Syria that many journalists who are not used to covering the Middle East do not know. Every time a journalist is kidnapped in Syria, governments and international press freedom organizations put pressure on the Free Syrian Army, their affiliated brigades, or Islamist fighting groups to help find the missing. “This results in the groups controlling a certain region to monopolize the fixers in their area, control who goes in and out, and end up making a business out of it. This pushes more experienced journalists who don’t want to have ‘guardians and minders,’ to choose unsafe entry points just to avoid dealing with censorship on the opposition side,” Mhanna pointed out.

He also said that in Syria, journalists are expected to pick a side. “If they don’t pick a side or even pretend to pick a side, they become victims,” he mentioned.

Jane Smith, a freelance journalist whose name has been changed upon her request, said that she has experienced quite a few moments of panic inside Syria, even though she did not chase down dangerous stories. She crossed the border into Syria from Turkey. “Apart from the fact that it was very expensive to get there to start with, I thought my end was near when a group of Syrian men surrounded me and my fixer [threatened] to seize me because they were under the impression that I looked Russian. We spent ten minutes explaining I was American, which seemed to be a problem again because my country’s government was not supportive enough,” Smith said. “It was a minor incident, but it could have turned into a mess if my fixer wasn’t calm enough,” she added. She also said that as a freelancer, she has personal insurance and that most television stations she produces video reports for don’t even mention her security when she pitches a report.

According to Georges Fahmy, a security expert and personal protection consultant with [Senshido Middle East](#), journalists covering conflicts often risk as much as military personnel and should receive training in high risk environment survival procedures. “You need to be fit, be prepared especially mentally, because on the ground you’re not going to be treated fairly,” he told NOW.

He also said that, as a security expert, he always advises people who work in risky areas to have a weapon on them. “Even a good solid metal pen can be in handy when you need to fight your way out of a situation,” Fahmy pointed out. “The most important thing you can do is to feel the atmosphere of ‘the crowd.’ If they start to get restless, find an excuse, and move away, avoid trouble, evade, even at the cost of a scoop. It is always better than becoming a victim,” he added. He also explained groups usually kidnap easy targets, whose personal security they deem to be weak or nonexistent after assessing their vulnerabilities.

A publication should not send a high-profile reporter to interview people loyal to a newly established fringe group, as sufficient information on how these people operate is likely still unavailable. Stick to the “Big Name” groups out there to minimize your chances of being taken by professional kidnappers (who would “resell” you) or by newbies who want to make a name for themselves through Shock and Awe. No reporter should simply go inside Syria to cover a story without “putting their affairs in order.” “Inform your family and your editor where

you're going, come up with a code of duress to let your friends know that you're in danger, for example 'How is grandma?' Cover your back, because unlike diplomats and VIPs who can afford to wait for rescue, if captured, you're in for the long haul," Fahmy cautioned.

Ana Maria Luca is on Twitter @aml1609.