

TO THE FRONTLINE AND BEYOND

PORTRAITS OF SWEDISH WAR CORRESPONDENTS

PART 1 | Johan-Mathias Sommarström

Mosul, Iraq. Destroyed building at the cornice along the Tigris in Mosul, following war with the Islamic State.
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IN A NEW INTERVIEW SERIES, THE PERSPECTIVE SAT DOWN WITH FOUR SWEDISH FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS TO DISCUSS THE CONTRASTING REALITIES OF PEACE AND CONFLICT AND THEIR OWN THOUGHTS ON THE CLASHES THEY COVER. PARTS 2 (TERESE CRISTIANSSON) AND 3 (NICLAS HAMMARSTRÖM & MAGNUS FALKEHED) WILL CONTINUE IN THE PERSPECTIVE WEBZINE.

The day we (digitally) sit down to talk, the world remains mired in the pandemic. Johan-Mathias Sommarström is Sveriges Radio's Middle East correspondent currently stationed in Istanbul, Turkey. He first started working as a journalist in 1987 and has ever since covered a variety of topics ranging from sports to conflicts. He reported from the hotspots of the Arab Spring, Tunisian Revolution, Gaza conflict and beyond. Even though nowadays his journalistic objectives remain the same, his methods have been unavoidably changed.

"The problem now is that I don't get the new contacts. Not many at least," admits Sommarström. He remains in digital touch with his old contacts from Iran, Syria and Yemen—to name just a few locations. "But it's not the same thing. Of course not. The reporting is a little bit more pale. You miss a sense, you miss the smell of the country. It's not as good as it should be. I'm not proud of the reporting right now, but we do the best we can."

The realities of war reporting are gritty regardless of the global circumstances. The local conflict landscape is always tight—but not limited to the frontline, as Sommarström mentions in one of his answers. With coronavirus disease spreading over the horizon, we're reminded of the conflicts covered by Sommarström in the past, his self-identity, journalism on the ground and all things foreseen and unforeseen.

TP: Krzysztof Miller, a Polish press photographer said once that "You might happen to be a war correspondent, but you are not one at all times."

How do you perceive yourself?

JMS: I totally agree with the quote, because I really don't see myself as a war correspondent. I know, some people do, but I don't. I mean, I work in a lot of war areas on the front line, behind the front line, and sometimes far away from the front line. But in a way, I'm a little bit allergic to the label of a "war correspondent." It gives me a feeling more about, you know, reporting about bullets and bombs. And of course, we report about bullets and bombs. But the core in reporting from war is to me reporting about stories of the vulnerable people, about the people fleeing the area. It could be in the middle of the front line, but it could also be 10 kilometers from the front line—in a refugee camp or a refugee point. It's the most difficult work and the easiest work at the same time. It's easy to report because something is always happening. But at the same time, all the people you meet are so destroyed, they lost relatives, they lost their houses, they almost lost their lives for what they built up. And it's quite a challenge to cope with that. So I think you are not only a journalist. Of course, it's so important to report correctly and everything. But you also are like a psychologist—sometimes people want to talk and you lend them your ear. And even if you don't always broadcast their stories, it's so important that they have someone they can talk to.

Was there a specific conflict—or a situation—that was especially difficult for you, or maybe most important?

Absolutely. I would start by saying that every crisis is emotional. In so many ways. I mean, the Gaza



Johan-Mathias Sommarström in Mosul, during the war against the Islamic State. © Johan-Mathias Sommarström

War 2014, for example. Everyone in the Gaza Strip was affected by that war because the area is so small, the bombs were coming down all day long, all night long. And everybody was affected. Everybody knew someone who was killed or injured, so it was a tough war. But then we have the fight in Mosul, the coalition against ISIS. That was difficult because there were so many civilians trapped on the ISIS side—and they were used as human shields. And so many people were raped and killed—and they killed young children. And all the testimonies from there were really tough to bear, I have to say.

The conflict that affects me most is still Yemen. Because for me, Yemen is both heaven on earth and hell on earth. I've never met people who were so kind and invited you to their homes—and they're really nice. And it's a beautiful country. But, at the same time, it's the world's biggest disaster. The kids are starving, they are dying because they don't have any food. Imagine 20 million people who don't know when they'll eat next time. And that's the situation in Yemen. You have so many landmines. Kids who play, they step on landmines and lose a leg—if they're lucky. And the psychological thing:

I often talk to children when I'm out. They always have these dreams. In Syria and Iraq, I ask: who do you want to be when you grow up? And they say, "Engineer. I want to help build my country," or "I want to be a doctor so I can treat the injured."

But in Yemen—they don't have any dreams. All they want is food or safety.

It's a big difference. The catastrophe in Yemen, its magnitude... it's enormous.

Do you have opinions on the conflicts you cover? I imagine it changes once you're boots on the ground. Is objective coverage even possible? Should it be strived for?

I must say, as long as we are thinking individuals, I think it's impossible not to have opinions, right? If anyone says that they are going to a war area

without any opinion, I would say they are lying. But the question is—can you handle that? I mean, can you go there, report objectively and without putting your feelings in the report? Take Mosul as an example. ISIS was really the bad part of that war. It was important to fight them. But it was also important to tell stories from Mosul. So we had to listen to the people who lost their relatives, we had to listen to people who were injured. And we had to listen to civilians. But we also had to listen to the military, to the politicians, and even to ISIS. Why did they do all this? And we had to report about the coalition's aggression in Mosul. The coalition killed as many people as ISIS, even though for a good cause. But still, it was them who bombed the city to ruins. ISIS did even worse things. But still, you have to be able to tell both sides of the story.

You mentioned talking to ISIS. How did it happen? How do you reach sources like that?

I interviewed members of ISIS several times in Mosul and Kirkuk in Iraq. One of the times, we had connections so we could interview a member. We sneaked out of Mosul, we met him, and did the interview. Another time we interviewed jailed ISIS members. They were in prison in Iraq, so we got access to them. And that's a little bit problematic because when they are in prison, the guards want to be in the same room. You don't know if the prisoners say what they want. But still, it was interesting to hear that.

You said "we." Who are the other people you usually work with?

Alone as a journalist, but I always have a fixer—like a coordinator who helps me translate who has local knowledge—they know the ground where we are, and they know people. Sometimes we have a driver—so we are two or three.

Today anyone can document anything with a flick of their smartphone. Will citizen journalism reduce the demand for sending designated correspondents to conflicted areas?

It depends, I would say. Sometimes it's only covering—I mean, shooting pictures or videos and posting them online. But sometimes there's more journalism to it. But it is, in a way, problematic because many of the citizen journalists are a part of one side. So, the one using that material has to know which side this citizen journalist is doing his coverage for.

In Syria, for example, at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, citizen journalism kind of exploded. But many of the citizen journalists—I would say, like 99%—were on the rebel side, on the Free Syrian Army side, or—as people saw at the beginning of the war—on the good side. Some of the citizen journalists were really good and they got contracts with AFP [Agence France Presse] or Reuters, to film for them in areas where they couldn't come. But it is problematic because they are risking their lives. What if something happens to them? Who will take responsibility? No one. And I think that's a huge problem. And you have to be sure what kind of purpose they have. Are they reporting because they want to just show how things are, or are they reporting because they want a political change? My company would never use a citizen journalist. That is because of the safety; we don't use freelance material or anything from areas where we wouldn't send our own reporters or correspondents.

Do you feel like your realities at work and at home are clashing with each other?

They're clashing all the time. I can give an example. The summer of 2014. First, we had the Gaza War. That was a really tough war. And then ISIS came to Mosul, came to Iraq. The fight started for real there, and I met so many victims. When I came

back to Sweden, I felt almost aggressive. You know, I was at the grocery store. People were complaining over a long queue. And I was like—yeah, they're complaining over this... My kids wanted to have a new iPhone and I was like—fuck these standards. I was really—I was so angry all the time, because I felt that in Sweden life is so good. We complain over details, but it's so good compared to what I've been seeing and working with all summer. That was really, really difficult for me. And besides, if you heard booms from the construction site or a car door being shut... I was so afraid, you know, but only for a millisecond.

I guess it was your subconsciousness acting?

Yeah, it was. I went and talked to a psychologist who helped me a lot. And I think everyone who works in war areas should do that. Sometimes it's like a macho thing to say, "Oh, we are taking a beer afterwards and talking about it."

But when journalists talk and have a beer together, they are competing in who was almost killed today.

"Ah, I was almost killed today because the bullet was only like, 10 centimeters away from me." "It was only five centimeters for me!" It's stupid.

There are so many conflicts that you've covered, so many places you have been to. How do you prepare for your missions?

It's very difficult. And it's very complicated. I had a colleague who was killed in Kabul. So after that, they really want us to analyze this really deeply. So I analyze the situation of the place where I go, I imagine threats. I try to see where the checkpoints are, who manages your checkpoints. Which part of the army is where. Is the front line moving? I set everything. Where is the closest hospital? I arrange my fixer. Does he need first aid education? Or does he already know it? And things like that. I'm planning a journey soon to Yemen again. And I think I wrote like 10 A4 pages, just security. But, then, when I get to do that, I start to feel afraid, scared. I feel like: "No, I'm not going. I'm not going." I think that for weeks, or days at least. And when I'm on a plane or in a car, I always think: "No, I'm gonna turn around. I'm gonna turn around, I will go home. My boss will say it's okay." And [it's like that] all the way until I step over that line, when I'm actually in the conflict area. Then I can just focus on work.

Are you the one contacting and finding the fixer or is your company doing that?

No, I do that. And that is difficult also, because during the Syrian war, for example, some fixers were selling their journalists to ISIS and Al Qaeda, so they could kidnap them. It happened several times in Syria. So you really need to know that you can trust the fixer. And even if you trust them, even if you knew them before, you have to be so sure that they don't need money right now—or other things.

So, how do you become "so sure"?

Well, it's difficult to be 100% sure. My fixer in Yemen, for example, I know him very, very well. So I trust him with my life. In Syria, it was more problematic, I would say. And even in Iraq; some fixers in Iraq were pretty young guys. They wanted to be cool. They wanted to have something to brag about. They wanted to do more dangerous things than I

wanted to do. So I had to be their brake. And sometimes I was really angry, furious, and said, "Hey, I'm the boss." I don't like to use that language, but sometimes I had to. And they were like, "No, no, no, it's nothing dangerous yet." But how do you know? We haven't been there earlier today.

One time, I didn't trust my gut feeling. You know, sometimes I get that gut feeling that we shouldn't go any further here because it might be dangerous. I don't know what it is but I know that military expertise are studying the gut feeling. One time I had this feeling. But everybody said it was fine to go there. Everyone, even the military. So we went there. And they were shooting at us. ISIS snipers were. Now I sound like this bragging journalist I was talking about... I had it on tape when they were shooting at us. I felt the wind from the bullet. And we had to take cover behind the car. And they were shooting at the car. There were so many bullet holes in the car. And after a while, a helicopter came and rescued us.

You said the helicopter rescued you. Do you have some kind of protocol for these kinds of situations, near-death experiences?

We were only lucky because the Iraqi army was in the same place. And they had radio contact we have with the Air Force or what it was. So the Air Force came and shot the place where the sniper was. We don't really have a protocol. We are prepared so we know which hospital to take me to if I'm injured. And we are very well educated in first aid, trauma-informed care and things like that.

Is it something that your company trains you to do before you go abroad?

Yes. First of all, we spend a week in Munich, in the mountains outside of Munich, where we have scenarios—everything is for real. But it's a scenario. We

are reporting, and all of a sudden, we are kidnapped, we are forced to the ground, we get beaten. It's all kinds of scenarios—just so we experience it. And the big thing is first aid education.

Thank you—I think this is it. I was wondering if there's anything you would like to say from yourself, any message you would like to convey.

Yeah. For those who really are interested in going to a war area, I would say: think twice. It fucks your mind up if you want it or not. And you really have to be prepared. So really think twice. I met some guys, they were really young. I was on the Syrian border and they were coming with oversized flak jackets [a form of body armor]. Two, four sizes too big for them. They were looking ridiculous. They came and asked the Free Syrian Army: "Where is the bus to Mosul, to Aleppo?" And they were like: "Bus to Aleppo? This is a war area. Do you think we have bus traffic here? A timetable? No. Grow up." And those guys were kidnapped later on, of course.

Do you think this kind of approach is a generational thing, or just lack of experience?

I think maybe it's not a generational thing. I think it's just some people are more stupid than others. There are so many dangers—not only that you can be shot or bombed. You can get kidnapped, you can get really sick by the food you eat. There are so many UXOs [unexploded ordnance] so you can explode—also happened during the Mosul war. Several journalists were killed because they were unlucky.

So, is being successful—if I can even use that word—a mix of preparation and luck?

No, I wouldn't say luck. It's a mix of preparation and daring to admit to yourself that you listen to your fear. Be a little bit scared. Don't be a cowboy.