



# THE SISTERHOOD OF JOURNALISTS

*By Leslie Cohen*

*Zahra Hankir talks about what it means to be a journalist  
covering the Middle East, and what she has learned  
from her fellow colleagues*

**Z**ahra Hankir is the creator and editor of the best-selling anthology *Our Women on the Ground*, which gathers the essays of nineteen women reporting from conflict zones in the Arab World. The book has been critically acclaimed, and described as a groundbreaking work of journalism that cuts through old stereotypes about the region, and the work of women reporters within it. It is also a moving collection of stories that, in its Best Books of 2019 list, the *Guardian* said “showcases journalism at its bravest. Determination, grit, and humor shine through”.

Hankir credits her start in the region to working as an economics correspondent for Bloomberg in Dubai. Her time there coincided with the beginning of the Arab uprisings, and later their fallout. With a dearth of Arabic speakers in her office, she also helped monitor local media; according to her, that was how she began following and developing a passion for the work that Arab women journalists were doing in their own countries to cover an unprecedented era of change and upheaval. Noting the discrepancies between how the Arab World is covered by Arabs and Westerners, and the nuance of those differences, became an inspiration for the book she would later publish.

Hankir has returned numerous times to her family’s home in Lebanon—where she lived half her life—throughout her career, both as a freelance journalist and as a reporter for the local *Now Lebanon*. She continues to write with compassion and clarity of the harrowing struggles people in that country face. But she also writes of culture, identity, and small moments of recognition and personal triumph people find in their everyday lives. Hankir sat down with *Cairo Review* editor Leslie Cohen to discuss her work, how experience has shaped her journalism, and where she is headed next.



**Cairo Review:** *First of all, your book **Women on the Ground** is a captivating read. How have you felt its impact in the years since you published it in 2019?*

**Zahra Hankir:** I'm very proud of that book. I started work on it five years ago, but it still feels so relevant to the current moment. Looking at the state of journalism and the state of politics in the Arab World, and in particular looking at, for example, Shireen Abu Akleh's death

in Palestine, the stakes that women face are very high. So, I receive a lot of messages from young Arab women journalists across the region who are often seeking advice or just reaching out to say how inspired they are by the women in the book. It gives me the most fulfillment and gratification to know that it still has this ripple effect on inspiring women across the region, despite the fact that there are so many risks, that people are still

△ Zahra Hankir, Brooklyn, 2019.  
Photograph by Maria Wilson

committed to doing that truth-telling and that storytelling.

*Have the stakes gone up for women reporting in the region? And speaking further to Shireen's death, and whether any justice is served, will this affect morale for women reporting in the region?*

Of course there is that question of justice and accountability and that does weigh on people, not solely in covering Palestine and the nuances around Palestine, but around the region as well. We are continuing to see journalists being detained, threatened, and assaulted on the job. The region continues to lag compared to other regions in terms of both press freedoms and women's rights issues. So when you bring those two together, it creates a difficult situation for women journalists. People often ask me, "Well, is it unique to women? Or do men face the same issues in the region?" I would say that men face similar issues when it comes to security, but that there are many factors that are intensified for women.

That might have to do with access, with family, with sexual harassment; that might have to do with workplace discrimination, with being targeted solely because you are a woman in specific situations. I would also add to this that there is substantial risk for women journalists online. A lot of women have online presence on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, because they turn to that type of journalism to have an immediate relationship with their audiences and immediate access to their audiences.

But oftentimes that opens them up to trolling and online abuse, which some of the women in *Our Women on the Ground* have experienced. Aida Alami, the Moroccan journalist, is one of them. I personally experienced it myself. That is also another front of harassment that women are being subjected to.

There was a UN report not too long ago that specifically focused on the trolling elements. And it goes even beyond trolling; it is harassment that can sometimes turn into real-life threats.

*Do you feel in the years that you've been doing this work, that you've learned tricks or ways of making it a bit easier for yourself as a female journalist? How would you say that you've adapted or that you've learned or changed as a journalist?*

I am not currently based there, but when I do journalism in the region—and the most recent substantial bit of journalism I did was in the aftermath of the Beirut blast—I have learned to become a lot less, or have tried to be a lot less emotionally involved with all the sources that I speak to or that I interview. And that's extremely difficult to do because often these are people from your own country; sometimes they're from your own neighborhood. Sometimes they might be people that you know, that are suffering in a way that is really, really profound.

It's hard, but I did learn from the women in *Our Women on the Ground* that sometimes having that distance can be beneficial because otherwise the trauma begins to impact you and settle within you, and that can then impact

your work. So I throw myself into the reporting and I do what I need to do and I don't give myself time to think about it in the moment. And then I sort through my own feelings after I've done the work. But as a journalist, my primary goal is to report these stories, to do what I have to do on the ground to ensure that I'm getting stories from the people themselves rather than talking heads or officials; that I'm actually witnessing what they've experienced, the sights, and the sounds and smells, and all that kind of thing.

I personally have not experienced similar threats or violence, that a lot of the women in the book have experienced—for those who have covered warfare, for those who are from countries in which it's more difficult to move around as a woman. So I do not claim to have experienced any of those difficulties myself. That said, I did notice and I think this is worth saying that you do see some of the women experiencing very similar challenges. So one of the ones that came up a lot was guilt. Am I doing enough to tell the story? Am I disappointing the people that I'm writing about? Am I doing the story justice? Am I betraying my family? Am I betraying my husband? Am I betraying my children and betraying my role as a mother, as a wife, as a potential partner? Is me being a journalist preventing me from getting married and having children? There's this very, very heavy sense of guilt across all the chapters, that I personally have not found with male reporters who cover the region.

The risks are different from country to country. So we have had brazen

attacks on journalists across the region, both female and male, in the past few years. You see what happened to Jamal Khashoggi, obviously, it's of a different nature, given how highly politicized that was and how his commentary from DC agitated certain forces in Saudi Arabia, but it still speaks to this element of speaking out. And speaking truth to power can often land you in very difficult situations and put your life at risk. Similarly, in Lebanon, there was a journalist called Lokman Slim who spoke out against certain political forces in Lebanon, namely Hezbollah, and he was assassinated in broad daylight. We don't know who the perpetrators are, but people speculate as to who they are.

And then you saw in Egypt, Lina Attalah, who is in my book; she's an excellent journalist. She was detained outside the prison where her colleague Alaa Abdelfattah was being held in 2020. And she was detained for some of that journalism that she was doing. She was then released, but I think that's partially because she has such a high public profile. Again, this is somebody who was detained for doing her job. So as you can see, it does impact both men and women. But I would say there are unique challenges for women.

Even in Lebanon, where you could say it's more liberal or easier to operate or live in as a female journalist, you still do see and experience harassment. There still are security issues. You do have to engage in some self-censorship. You do have invisible red lines that you shouldn't be crossing. And these are things that I experienced as a journalist myself as well. At that time. I certainly

experienced sexual harassment there. I certainly experienced or chose to engage in self-censorship at various points.

*It's interesting how you reference starting to build something of a wall or a way to distance yourself. I thought your piece on a Lebanese man named Elie was so sensitive to the honesty of that human connection that you had with someone, even though they were a source and you a journalist. I can see you needing to have that wall in yourself, but does having it influence your work as well?*

I appreciate that. I still have a picture of him on my wall. I know that I just spoke to the importance of having that distance. And I really did try to have that distance with Elie, who was a survivor of the Beirut blast, lost his home, and then died from COVID-19 a few months later. I did try to maintain the distance with him, but he very much continued to communicate with me over the weeks and months to the extent that I could not ignore it. He needed somebody and I was present to the best of my ability and attempting at the same time to be professional as a journalist. But it's almost impossible to remove your humanity. You can't. You have to engage with empathy and understanding. And it wasn't really until much later on that I realized that he'd become my friend, no matter how hard I tried to maintain that distance. And I was extremely moved and saddened by his death, and I continue to think of him quite frequently.

I don't think I would have handled it any differently. And I don't in any way regret that we eventually became

friends. I think it was just natural for it to happen. But that was one example of that delicate balance of being professional, but also being human and having natural reactions to what you're witnessing.

It's also easy, I think, in some cases, to slip into activism as well, when you become close to victims where you might want to help them or facilitate them rebuilding their lives. I know this happens a lot with the refugee community and refugee coverage. Nour Malas writes about this in her chapter in the book. She's a Syrian journalist who, like me, tried to maintain a distance, but found it very difficult to do so when you're trying to show empathy. So I think that this is a dance that a lot of journalists in the Middle East deal with quite, quite intensely and quite regularly. And I find reports throughout the community of women who face similar situations. We're always there for each other as a sisterhood and helping each other through these situations. But that's probably one of the most difficult stories I've covered, and I still haven't actually sorted my feelings out when I think about Elie.

*This issue of the Cairo Review spans the subject of global journalism under assault, and perhaps that human element is why it matters so much. What makes your work interesting is the subtle notes of the human experience you capture.*

I try my best. And I learned from great journalists before me. You know when I think of people who capture the human experience, I think, of course, of Anthony Shadid. And I think many of us do. And I always try to bring that



human element into my reporting. And I think you can't do stories justice in the region without telling the stories of its people. So I went from doing very dry reporting on stock markets in Dubai to really throwing myself back into some human interest stories. Cultural stories too—I do love to write about culture.

There's a lot of tragedy across the region. But when I can, I try to write about literature; I try to write about travel—uplifting, different pieces. I wrote a piece once for *Vice* about Om Ali in Egypt. You know, the dessert. So I do try to find interesting or different types of angles in my coverage that aren't all focused on tragedy and destruction, because that's not the truth of the entire region. There is tragedy and destruction, but there's also a lot of beauty in the culture, too.

*Of course. And your new book is on the history of eyeliner. Is that right?*

I went fully in that direction with my next book. But I really do want to be candid there: I think it was a reaction to the first book in the sense that the first book was very heavy. It was very filled with trauma and tragedy and all of the themes that I mentioned: guilt and exile and identity politics and so on. And it did weigh on my mental health, which I think is important to talk about: to talk about journalists in the Middle East and mental health and how fragile it can be. And I obviously also felt my own sense of guilt, because I was editing this book from the comfort of my flat in London at the time, and I had all of the security and the protections and the passport—the privilege of a British passport. So I felt like I was a bit of a fraud and I

was dealing with all of these incredible journalists. And I just felt, okay, the next book that I do, I want it to be slightly different in tone.

It turned out to be very different in tone, and to celebrate, a layered story of culture from across the region that's not necessarily rooted in the current moment of geopolitics. In the Middle East and North Africa particularly in Egypt, there's a rich history of the origins of eyeliner—which is technically kohl—and I open my book with Queen Nefertiti, who I argue is the first beauty influencer. You could find her bust in small hair salons across the United States as far as one hundred years ago after [the original] was unveiled. So I've always been interested in cultural practices and how they carry over from decade to decade and century to century, and the fact that the story of kohl started in Ancient Egypt for me was fascinating.

Eyeliner is ubiquitous across the Middle East. It is also known as *kajal* and *sormeh*. Bedouins wear it in the desert to protect their eyes from the sun. It's worn for beautification practices, as well as for spirituality. The Prophet Muhammad was said to have worn *ithmid* in his eyes, which is a substance that darkened his eyes.

So I thought, okay, if I write this, I don't want it to be a coffee table book. I want it to be very rich, layered, entertaining, and different. And I wanted it to be a story that focuses on communities of color around the world and credits them for their contributions to the beauty industry. So I've traveled so far to Chad. I spent twelve days in the desert,

which was quite an experience, writing about a nomadic community called the Wodaabe. Every year they host a beauty contest where the women judge the men for how beautiful the men are and then the winning men can become the sexual partner of the woman that nominates them. It's a very fascinating cultural practice, but they wear kohl in pots that they dangle in necklaces, and they darken their eyes. I went to Jordan and spent time with the Bedouin community; India as well and the Kathakali community who use extravagant eyeliner. And I will go to Iran and Japan.

So there's so much history there and I've already learned so much. I do have a couple of chapters on the West. It's been really fascinating just to see how this one object has so many cultural practices around it. So I'm hoping that people will feel excited about the book. There's not yet been a mainstream book written about eyeliner. I don't even think there's been an academic one. I interviewed seventy-five people in Jordan about eyeliner. And I thought to myself, I don't think anyone's ever done this kind of questioning on this one, single object!

*The way you describe it, it's almost as if your own need to not burn out and to manage your mental health leads you down a path that more holistically represents the region in your reporting.*

That's absolutely true. And people, I think, also have an image of the Middle East through the media that they consume, whether that's online or in television or in books, of a very obviously troubled region, which it is in many ways. And I don't think it's celebrated

enough for its cultural beauty. And to have the ability to write about that and to celebrate it to me is a real privilege.

*If you had to give advice to readers, in an era where journalism has in many ways lost its reputation, and people are burned out by the media, have lost faith in it, what would you say? How can people stay engaged when it can be so painful and difficult?*

I have my own way of doing this. I'm very, very strategic and intentional with how I consume news. I follow particular publications, and I turn to those publications for updates. But I also at the end of every week, make sure to read long reads, the longer magazine pieces, to slow down a little bit, be a little bit pickier with what I'm consuming, and to allow myself to read a really good long piece of journalism to take it in and then to put it aside for the weekend. Just to know that if I'm going to turn to Twitter, I'm going to be getting the fast-paced updates. If I'm going to go to Instagram, I'm going to be getting some visuals, but I'm still going to be probably inundated with the heavier themes of the day. Especially in America, as you know. If we want to talk about what's happening with journalism in this country, it's a whole other thirty or forty minutes of discussion.

*You are Lebanese and have reported extensively there in the past and, of course, Lebanon has seen hard year after hard year. Is that still a focus of your journalism today?*

It's a sensitive question, and I think you'll find that most Lebanese people will answer similarly that it's hard to

live there and make a living there right now, especially if you have family that rely on you, and if you have the privilege of a passport that allows you to work elsewhere. And I do have family in Lebanon that I have to support. And I do have to think of my future. So there's always this sense of guilt that you're failing the country and its people by leaving because you're capitalizing on your own privilege.

My heart is always there, and I will write about Lebanon whenever I can. There are some excellent journalists doing excellent work out of Lebanon and I really admire

them. They are working against all the odds, really. And if you're in a country where electricity isn't guaranteed, your safety isn't guaranteed, clean water isn't guaranteed, food prices are through the roof; it's really difficult. The friends who are journalists who do work there that I know are struggling with their mental health for sure. So it's a sensitive subject for me. I always romanticize the idea of returning and living in Lebanon, but for the foreseeable future I feel like what I'm doing from afar is meaningful and I wouldn't be able to do it from there. So this is going to have to work for a while now, but it's a painful reality to face. 