

HFPA in Conversation

podcast | episode LAPFW 5

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September 16, 2019

Sam: **THIS IS SAM ASI FROM THE HFPA. TODAY I'M TALKING TO AFRAH NASSER. AFRAH NASSER A MULTI-AWARD, INDEPENDENT YEMENI JOURNALIST AND BLOGGER LIVING IN EXILE IN SWEDEN SINCE 2011 WHEN SHE FACED DEATH THREATS IN HER HOME COUNTRY WHERE SHE PRACTICED JOURNALISM SINCE 2008. NASSER'S REPORTING ON YEMEN'S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS HAS BEEN PUBLISHED IN INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATIONS SUCH AS CNN, HUFFINGTON POST, AL JAZEERA, AND THE NATIONAL. AND WON SEVERAL AWARDS, AMONGST THEM: PENNSKRAFT AWARD AND THE DAWIT ISAAK PRIZE AND THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS FREEDOM AWARD FOR THE COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS. IN 2015 ARABIAN BUSINESS RANKED HER AS 15 OUT OF THE 100 MOST POWERFUL PEOPLE IN THE ARAB WORLD, WHILE CNN HAS CALLED HER BLOG, ONE OF THE 10 MUST READ IN THE MIDDLE EAST. HELLO AFRAH.**

Yes.

THANK YOU FOR JOINING US AT THE HFPA PODCAST.

Thank you for having me.

Sam: **AFRAH, I WANT TO START WITH SWEDEN. HOW IS LIFE IN SWEDEN FOR YOU? ARE YOU ENJOYING LIVING IN SWEDEN AND DO YOU MISS YEMEN BECAUSE YOU ARE FROM YEMEN, AREN'T YOU?**

Well, there are some good and some bad days. I've gone through a lot of phases, and at this moment I am really missing the language because as you know, Yemen is fragmenting and into so many Yemenis. So, I know that whatever I am missing is not there any longer. So, what I miss really is the language. I realized from my travels around the Middle East that home for me is Arabic language. So that's what I miss the most. But Sweden is a great country really. I've had really, really wonderful friends here who have been more than a family for me. But you know, you can't help but miss some fundamental things like language.

Sam: **OF COURSE, LANGUAGE IS VERY IMPORTANT TO YOU BECAUSE THIS IS THE TOOL THAT YOU HAVE USED IN YEMEN SINCE A VERY YOUNG AGE. CAN WE GO BACK TO THAT AGE WHEN YOU BEGAN YOUR CAREER INTO WRITING? HOW DID THAT ALL START?**

Ah, that's a deep question. I can't remember exactly my relation to writings, to writing and literature. But I remember that my mom telling me that she remembers that when I was a teenager telling her that I want to be like Negi Bafult [phonetic 00:02:51] one day. I'm born to be a writer. Trying to think and remember so hard. I remember that I had a lot of journals. Every day I would write. So, when I had my job at Yemen Observer and Sanaa when they hired me, I was overjoyed. I thought this will not feel like work to be paid.



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Sam: **WHAT YEAR WAS THAT?**

Right after graduating from Sanaa University in late 2008.

Sam: **AND YOU GRADUATED IN ENGLISH LINGUISTICS, RIGHT?**

Yes, exactly. My relation to English in specific is a little bit complex. It was a way of me trying to escape being in the middle of two worlds. I have European origin as well and growing up in Yemen, I always felt I was Yemeni from Addis Ababa. I was born in Addis Ababa, and my mother is mixed also, but mainly of European, her native language is Amharic. So, I think my first native languages, like at the same time I spoke Amharic and Arabic at the same time. So English was an escape where I could find my own choice of a language.

Sam: **I'M SORRY TO DIGRESS HERE. AS YOU SAY YOU HAVE ALSO AN ETHIOPIAN CONNECTION? HOW WAS THAT IMPACTED YOU GROWING UP IN YEMEN?**

It took me some time really to come in terms of my so many identities because absolutely there was some stereotypes or prejudices against black people and sometime racism and especially growing up in Sanaa where it's a conservative society in general. Unlike let's say, in Aden, where it was more open, where you have multi-ethnicity groups. It's the norm there to have Adeni Indian, for example. Sanaa, there was a class or a hierarchy. It was always nice to be Yemeni American or Yemeni British, but not Yemeni Ethiopian. So, I tried to hide it, but with time I realized it was some sort of strength that I could have and try to show that Yemen has an international face. That yes, I could be many and Ethiopian and Swedish. So that was for me like trying to be ambassador of the mixed-race generation or something like that. But my work in general focusing on Yemen, I think it stems from trying to prove that I was more Yemeni than any other Yemeni. So that's why I think I heavily specialized on Yemen in my journalism work. Today I see myself as an international citizen, especially the Swedish layer add some international perspective. Home is everywhere, honestly. I'm very lucky to have friends everywhere. So, it's no longer like complexity and the way I see life and the way I see my identity.

Sam: **THIS IS INTERESTING. YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT BEING, NOT ETHIOPIAN, BUT WITH EUROPEAN BACKGROUND LIVING IN YEMEN AND FACING A STIGMA IN YEMEN. HOW MUCH DID THAT AFFECT YOUR CAREER RISING IN YEMEN? YOU HAVE BECOME INFLUENTIAL YEMENI PERSONALITY. HOW DID THAT AFFECT YOU PROFESSIONALLY?**

I think what affected my profession was the class and coming from working-class where my family put an emphasis on education and that I have to finish my study and my mom especially worked really hard sometimes overtime to earn money and put us in a nicer school. So, I think that was the determining factor and people like me, Ethiopian and Yemeni. We're a huge community, by the way, were called Muwaladeen, which means you're born, or you have some sort of a birth connection to other than Yemen. Unfortunately, because how going around and migrating from one place and escaping famine, both for Yemenis and Ethiopians, so such families are always struggling to find the best education, to not go through unbelievable poverty. So that impacts this community, and usually, you find them not well educated or not reaching high levels. It reflects the whole situation, economic situation and in both countries, because as you know, Ethiopia and Yemen for a long time they faced famine and civil wars and so on. But I am trying. I am doing my best. Today I'm very lucky that a lot of Yemenis feel like, oh, that's cool. I have Afrah as a friend who is both Yemeni and Ethiopian, which it really feels nice really. But I worked hard for this level really.



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Sam: **OKAY. YOU STARTED JOURNALISM, WORKED FOR MAJOR OUTLETS IN YEMEN. EVERYTHING WAS FINE UNTIL 2010. WHAT WERE YOU WRITING ABOUT AND HOW WAS IT PRACTICING JOURNALISM IN THOSE YEARS?**

So, for three years and a half before the uprising, I always wanted to cover political issues and the political developments, especially that, I mean the political situation in Yemen, a lot of journalists when they dare to cover, let's say what the president at that time, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was doing. You can hear all the time about journalists being detained, prosecuted. So, I always wanted to do that, but I couldn't because first, my family did not allow me at that time to cover politics. So, they always told me like just cover social and cultural stuff. Even the editorial team in the newspaper, they always felt like to protect me for my own security, it was better that I avoid politics. Later on, I knew this was a global issue. Women are expected to cover soft topics: fashion, cooking, and things like that. So, when the uprising happened, it was a double revolution for me. It was a revolution at home, revolution on the street because I-

Sam: **WE'RE TALKING HERE ABOUT 2011, RIGHT?**

Yes, yes. I rebelled against my family's orders and the editorial team as well. And I started to cover politics. It was no way you write about anything else. Everything was political at that time.

Sam: **BUT AT THAT TIME, 2008 TO 2011, THEN WHAT DID YOU WRITE THAT WAS TOLERATED BY THE REGIME AT THE TIME?**

So, the biggest or the top priorities for women issues at that time was the maternal mortality rate and child marriage, just as an example. And the art scene was always interesting. So, these types of topics I've covered extensively, and then the more you talk about such problems and how everyone is complaining. The women are complaining, the artists are complaining, you realize that because the core of the problem is political, and we need a drastic change.

Sam: **SO, I MEAN THAT WAS, YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT CORRUPTION BECAUSE I HEARD THAT CORRUPTION WAS RISING IN YEMEN FROM A LONG TIME.**

Yes. Yeah. The higher poverty rate was the higher corruption rate was in Yemen. So, they were like correlated really with all the statistics and living in Yemen myself, you could see how there was a huge gap between the rich and the poor.

Sam: **SO, WHEN DID YOU FEEL THAT YOUR LIFE WAS, OR YOU'RE FACING A REAL THREAT TO YOUR LIFE AT THAT TIME AND THAT COMPELLED YOU TO LEAVE AND LIVE IN EXILE?**

Well, I left by coincidence. I had an invitation to attend the workshop at the Swedish Institute, and the workshop was for about two weeks and about social media and human rights, and it was something relevant to my work, and it was also for other journalists from the MENA region and Swedish activists as well. So, that was already planned I should go to Sweden. It was just that timing, that period with so many things happening in a very limited time. So, it was very hectic. I didn't know what was Sweden before coming, and I've traveled before that. I thought I would come to Sweden for the workshop and leave because I've done it before in Switzerland and Jordan. So, and I really wanted to go back and continue the revolution. It was before traveling, I had received some annoying messages, and one of them was a death threat or threatening me through my family. So, for example, one wrote that your family, your mom, and sister, will be the price of your recklessness. So, when it started to be directed to my mother and sister, I started to feel a little bit concerned, so I thought that maybe I need to re-think how I do things, how I write, what to say, what not to say. And then, when I came to Sweden, the violence started in Sanaa. And the airport was shut down, so I asked my family what should I do. And at that time, it was like the first moment of the violence, and I was emotionally devastated. So, I didn't know what to



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do, so my family told me you can come back through I don't know say Un Airport for example and you will not write ever again. You have to know that. The situation is very bad, and we will not allow you to write. So, I was getting the death threat, and I was getting this pressure from my family not to write anymore, which is understandably they were so afraid for me. So, I decided I'm going to stay here. At least that was a temporary solution at that time and the rest of history.

Sam: WHAT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY? WERE THEY TARGETED, WERE THEY HURT?

I have a lot of family members in Sanaa and Aden and Taiz, so they're not politically really engaged at all. So, they didn't face the danger that a journalist would face, and I started to rephrase the way I say things in order not to risk their lives. And I had a different writing strategy. So, for that time, nothing really major happened and eventually, they supported my decision and it was okay.

Sam: SO, WHAT HAPPENED TO OTHER JOURNALISTS? YOU HAPPENED TO FIND THE REFUGE IN SWEDEN, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE OTHERS WHO ARE STILL THERE IN YEMEN? WHAT KIND OF FATE DID THEY MEET?

So, in the beginning, I was like attacked online heavily and even by some journalists, but with time and how the situation went from worse to worse, a lot of journalists received or been exposed to unbelievable danger. So, for instance, after the Houthis took over Sanaa in 2014, we have one of the best investigative Yemeni journalists, Mohammed Alabsi, and honestly he was a great person. The way we communicated, I had nothing but respect for him. And he was poisoned to death. And a lot of people believe it was the Houthis, because he had a lot of sources in governmental institutions where they could leak to him really interesting documents that prove corruption by certain individuals, certain influential individuals, so it was of these individuals' interest that Alabsi be silenced forever. You have another case, for example, of [Nabeel Sabaya 00:19:12], who got almost assassinated. The sniper shot him in the leg. We don't know 'til today who shot him. He miraculously survived. He was hospitalized to Cairo and he couldn't even write afterwards. He got traumatized and I met him myself in Egypt. He got so traumatized that he doesn't believe in writing anymore. So, you have all of these incidents for journalists and some of them come to me and tell me that you did the right thing. It's not ... you've been more useful from outside than being in Yemen.

Sam: YOU DID NOT ESCAPE, THESE OR THE OTHERS, YOU HAD TO LEAVE WAY BEFORE THE RISE OF THE HOUTHIS. IT WAS THE GOVERNMENT AT THE TIME, THE ALI SALEM.

Yeah.

Sam: HOW WAS IT THEN FOR JOURNALISTS? WAS IT WORSE THAN NOW OR WAS IT SAFER? WHAT KIND OF CHANGE OCCURRED DURING HIS TIME AND AFTER HIS TIME, TO JOURNALISTS, OF COURSE?

I honestly don't like to compare tragedies, because Yemen has always been an extremely tough situation, especially for the press. So, under Ali Salem al Beidh for example, he was institutionalizing censorship. Today, under Houthi rebels' rule, you don't find independent journalism at all. So, most of journalists, whether they are forcibly disappeared, or we do know that they've been detained in prison and kept there without any charge and we don't know what will happen to them. There are 10 journalists who are facing potential death penalty under Houthis accords. There are many journalists who just left the profession and went to their villages or escaped the country and sought refuge and got ... [inaudible 00:21:44] ... in Korea and Egypt and Jordan and so on. So, inside the country today, the only media or the only press



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you have is absolutely controlled. It's controlled by this ruling party or that. There is no absolutely independent, free media.

Sam: YOU MENTIONED THE HOUTHIS. WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER SIDE THAT I BELIEVE REPRESENTED BY THE SAUDI-SUPPORTED GOVERNMENT, YOUR ALLIES, HOW DIFFERENT WAS THAT?

I'm telling you, there are many warring parties controlling the press. So, let's say in South of Yemen in Aden, there are state media or state-owned newspapers that were established since the revolution in the 60s and they were owned by the Ministry of Culture of Information and today, they have been taken over by let's say the Southern Transitional Council, which is a political and military group backed by United Arab Emirates. And these newspapers, you find the big front page published with pictures of Emirati amirs and saying thank you for Emirates. So, you feel like the country is actually two countries. They're not one country anymore. And then the Houthis, they absolutely took over also a lot of previously state-owned newspapers and the citizen anywhere, in the North, in the South, they turn into ... they don't buy actually these newspapers. They turn into social media, because that's the only almost limited space where you can find information outside the control of all these warring parties.

Sam: OKAY, WITH THE ABSENCE OF LEGITIMATE PRESS IN THE YEMEN, HOW DO YOU GLEAN INFORMATION FROM THERE WHILE YOU'RE SITTING IN SWEDEN?

Yeah, I've gone through a lot of phases as well and trying to come up with new ways. As we speak today with you, we're speaking, we're doing this interview through Skype call, which basically costs you nothing and costs me nothing and you know me, I know you and it's a credible conversation that we're having and that's how I did it like all this time. I almost have an account in all social media platforms. You just name it; I'll tell you what's my account. I might not be active, but I gather all my information from something called Open Source and I try to verify any information I get as best as I can. But quite often, when I get the information, it's more credible and faster than a lot of international media outlets. For example, many times when there are attacks happening in Sanaa, I will get the breaking news from my Tweets or people on Facebook and Instagram and so on before I get a notification from BBC, for example. Yemen, quite often, is not breaking news, but through my online community, it is a breaking news. When the war started, when the Saudi-led coalition began their military operation in 2015, I remember that my family called me and asked me what is happening? And they were in Sanaa and I was like, but you are there, you should know. And they're like we have no idea. There is no electricity, no TV, no radio, nothing. It's dark here. We only hear the bombs. And I was able to tell them what was happening even though I'm miles long away. So, I heavily depend on the Internet and I am proud to say that I've used it to the best way that I can, because I wish I am there, of course, to report from the ground, it's much, much better, but this is what's available at this moment.

Sam: I SEE REPORTS FROM THE YEMEN COMING THROUGH THE BBC OR AL JAZEERA. PROBABLY THERE ARE OTHERS, BUT THOSE ARE THE ONES I REGULARLY SEE. DO YOU TRUST THESE REPORTS? DO YOU THINK THEY CONVEY OR REFLECT THE TRUE REALITY IN YEMEN OR DO THEY HAVE ACCESS TO EVERYTHING THAT ENABLES THEM TO PRESENT THE CORRECT PICTURE THERE?

With all due respect to all these newspapers and news websites, I don't read them anymore. I don't. I'd rather spend my time calling on What's App. My refugee journalist friend in Korea who his family in Taiz are facing famine and Houthi snipers or I'd rather call my cousin in Aden, who couldn't pass the checkpoint, because God knows if it's the transitional counsel... or the Emiratis or the Saudis, so I am prioritizing my people. Yes, it's nice to read some analysis from



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international newspapers, but very often I get emails by these writers asking for my insight, which is also another unpaid job for a freelance journalist. So, it's a very tense relationship that I have with international media today because Yemeni is... you need a local connection really to really feel how the feeling is in these cities. So that's what I try to always focus on.

Sam: OKAY. WE TALKED ABOUT THE POLITICAL ISSUES IN YEMEN, AND PEOPLE RELY ON YOU, AT LEAST THE PRESS, TO GET THE PICTURE THERE. BUT YOU'RE ALSO ACTIVE IN OTHER ISSUES, AS YOU SAID, SOCIAL ISSUES, PARTICULARLY WOMEN ISSUES IN THE YEMEN. HOW BAD NOW IS THE SITUATION OF WOMEN, AND HOW WERE THEY AFFECTED BY THESE POLITICAL STRUGGLES?

Yeah, yeah. See, the reason I focus on the situation for women, and I've done a lot of reports about women in the North and the South and so on, because I really believe, even though the humanitarian situation and women's rights in Yemen is in a terrible, terrible situation, I really believe women would lead Yemen's future. I really think the more space we give women, the more we listen to them, the more we trust them, the more they will be able to hold the positions and lead the country into a safe place. Honestly, at this point, I don't care if Yemen is united or divided, but we need peace. I really believe that women in the North, women in the South, will have a huge role in achieving that peace. So, you have all the statistics about the famine, the cholera, but at the same time, there is a huge resistance from Yemeni women, and it's very admirable. Yemeni women used to have better women's rights than their sisters in UAE and Saudi Arabia. In this war, you can see women's rights and Yemen going really back a generation behind. At the same time, their sisters in Saudi Arabia, for example, are allowed to drive and so on. The timing's very important, I think. They're trying to polish Saudi image through using these women's rights and so on. So, it's really tragic situation. I think when it comes to the human rights of these women. But at the same time, there is a huge resistance, and I admire that very much. I think they deserve to be listened to and more spaces and so on.

Sam: YOU YOURSELF, I HEARD, WERE INSPIRED BY OTHER WOMEN FROM THE ARAB WORLD, AND WE SEE WOMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD BREAKING BARRIERS AND REACHING GREAT SUCCESS. IN FACT, I SAW THAT 40 FROM THE 100 MOST INFLUENTIAL SUCCESSFUL PERSONALITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 40 OF THEM ARE WOMEN. YOU YOURSELF, PROBABLY THE MOST KNOWN JOURNALIST FROM YEMEN. HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THAT, THE RISE OF WOMEN IN A VERY CONSERVATIVE SOCIETY?

I always tried finding movies that talks about women's right to vote in Europe, in Sweden, and UK, and Switzerland, and so on. I really feel that women's rights globally have come a long way. When you look at the Arab Spring in specific, I think with all of the failure of my generation, the Arab Spring generation, but at least we introduced a new discourse of human rights. If we look ten years or 20 years ago, we didn't use to talk about human rights then. We didn't use to have it at our home, for example, discussions revolving different aspects of a woman's situation and legal rights and human rights and so on. So, for me, I think this is part of a global movement. The Middle East deserve to live in dignity and with fully respected human rights. I think there will be a time where women all over the Middle East will enjoy their full rights. It's just a matter of time and also matter of women taking the struggle. If you look at Yemen, for example, women had the right to vote before women in Switzerland. Of course, there was a political will throughout the male elite political group at that time, but such steps women should take or seize them and continue the struggle. So, it's a movement that will continue and will achieve a lot.



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Sam: IT'S INTERESTING YOU MENTIONED THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT. I NOTICED YOU WRITE IN ENGLISH, AS WELL AS IN ARABIC, AND I HEARD SWEDISH. WHAT DO YOU GAIN FROM WRITING IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES? DO YOU TARGET DIFFERENT AUDIENCES THROUGH THESE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES?

Yeah, of course. Sam, you're a journalist yourself, and you know each message depends on the type of audience. For me, the main thing is advocating for Yemenis' right for peace, for human rights, for living in dignity. So, if I write to the Swedish audience, at this moment, I think one of the top concerns for me and Yemenis the Swedish weapons and also the Swedish diplomatic efforts, which is a double moral that we see from Sweden. They continue weapons sales, and then at the same time, they have really effective and remarkable diplomatic efforts other than any other country. So, that is something I try to discuss and analyze and also advocate the Swedish people, population, to ask or demand the end of Swedish weapons to the warring parties. The Arabic community, the Arabic audience, also they have their own concerns. In English mainly, I focus on the foreign policy of international actors towards Yemen. But the overall picture; I am just one writer in a bigger global justice movement, I think, where we all try to press our governments, and all means that we can and try to expose human rights violations and press and advocate with the limited capacity that we have.

Sam: OKAY, WE'LL GO BACK TO OUR FIRST POINT TO END WITH IT. YOU LEFT, OR YOU WERE FORCED INTO EXILE, BECAUSE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF ALI ABDULLAH SALEH. HE'S GONE. HE WAS ASSASSINATED. DOES THAT MEAN THE THREAT IS GONE TOWARDS YOU AND YOU CAN GO BACK TO YEMEN? WILL YOU GO BACK TO YEMEN?

Yes, I will, at some point. It's just a matter of some logistic, finance, and things like that. But the danger today is still there, and it might be extreme or more than before. It's something I always think about, really. If I go, what could happen? I try to take all the security measurements that I can, but I don't know. Eventually, it's the uncertainty, and I'm up for it.

Sam: HAVE YOU TRIED TO GO, FOR INSTANCE, TO GET CLOSER TO ETHIOPIA, WHERE YOU SAID IT'S KIND OF A SECOND HOME FOR YOU?

Oh, yes, oh, yes. I was in Ethiopia in May. I was happily invited. I happily accepted an invitation from the UNESCO, where they celebrated the Freedom of Press International Day. There was a huge conference run by the UNESCO and the Ethiopian government, and even the former British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, he was there. It was a historical moment for me. I was able to speak or brag a little bit, with my Amharic. A lot of Ethiopian journalists were really interested in talking to me, and I did a lot of interviews. All my Ethiopian side family, they were very, very happy. So yes, I go back to Ethiopia. I was close to Yemen. I was in Cairo for six months, mainly exploring the situation for Yemenis there because there is about 1 million, I think, Yemeni refugees there. Not necessarily refugees, but they keep going and leaving. So, I'm always in the region, and I always try to go back. The world seems like one big home, honestly.

Sam: AFRAH, [FOREIGN LANGUAGE 00:39:44]. OH, SORRY, I SAID IT IN ARABIC. AFRAH, THANK YOU SO MUCH.

Thank you, Sam.

Sam: I CAN ALSO SAY IT [FOREIGN LANGUAGE 00:39:51].

Ah, [foreign language 00:11:53].



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