

Jocelyn Grzeszczak: How did you get into reporting and writing about Hezbollah?

Sulome Anderson: It's a little complicated and I guess my story is maybe different from most people's. I got into journalism kind of late. I didn't want to be a journalist for a long time. I then kind of realized that it was what I really loved and what I was good at. I'm sure you know about my father and everything that happened with him. I was raised by journalists and I got into journalism, and then I went to Columbia J School. Then I moved to Lebanon, and worked for a local paper there, and started freelancing. I had already started interviewing Hezbollah members at that point. I can't get into how I know these people or who introduces me to them, cause it's really sensitive. I don't know how much to tell you about the process because it's literally something that I cannot talk about. But let's just say that I was introduced to someone who introduced me to someone and it went like that.

JG: Were you introduced to Hezbollah members while you were writing at this daily paper? Or before?

SA: It was a little after. I started working the Daily Star in 2011, and then I went back to the States for a little while. This must be 2013 that I started interviewing them. Just for stories. Then at one point I decided to write my book, so I started interviewing a lot more of them. It just is a process of meeting someone, getting them to trust you, and then after they trust you they'll introduce you to someone else. That process took me really deep into that world, and now I have my sources that I use regularly.

JG: So you started really diving into your work with Hezbollah in 2013?

SA: I think that was the first time I did an interview with any of them at all. Then by 2015 I had been interviewing them for a long time and I was well into my book by then. I got the idea for my book in fall 2013. I started writing it in 2014.

JG: Would you say that you first reached out or were contacted by Hezbollah because of your book, or did someone, like a publication, ask you to reach out to them?

SA: I went on my own. I should mention that the leadership has not okayed any of these interviews, so it's not through official channels. It's through my own sources. And they, as a rule, don't talk to foreign press at all. I actually get a lot of people online accusing me of making them up, or being fooled by fake Hezbollah members, which is ridiculous because I have a lot of them on video and they're clearly who they are. But the situation is unique. I think part of the reason they talk to me is, on some level, because they know who my father is. Sometimes they trust me less because of that, but oftentimes it makes them respect me. I don't know how to explain it, but it's an icebreaker with them for the most part.

JG: In your opinion, what is it about Hezbollah that classifies it as a terrorist organization or does not make it one? I feel like there's a tension.

SA: Yeah, there definitely is. That's a very interesting and important question. I wrote in my book quite a bit about how the group that kidnapped my father was more of a satellite group that was getting its orders from somewhere else. So when Hezbollah says, "We weren't the ones who did terrorism originally," they're kind of telling the truth. As far as I can tell from my reporting, and I'm sure a lot of people will disagree with me, the group that originally kidnapped my father was not getting its orders from the same place as Hezbollah. In the late 1980s, Hezbollah absorbed this group and took on its primary members, such as Imad Mughniyah, who then became a high ranker in Hezbollah and is worshipped as a hero, which is pretty screwed up since he masterminded my dad's kidnapping. As far as I can tell, they held onto those hostages for a couple of years after that and tried to get their own benefit from it, so it's not as clear-cut as they didn't do it. They were involved, but are they entirely culpable? I don't necessarily know the answer to that. In terms of the bombings, I've had it from ex-US intelligence who were assigned to these cases that they don't think that there's enough evidence that Hezbollah did the Marine Barracks bombings, that it was probably the Islamic jihad before. There's a grey area there, in terms of their roots in terrorism. From what I can tell, they're certainly not innocent of it, but they're not entirely guilty either. It's complicated because at the time, it wasn't Hezbollah as we know it now. It was a bunch of factions. They weren't all getting their orders from the same place. So it didn't start to really coalesce as the organization we know today until the late 80s. Do I think they're a terrorist organization today? Have they done horrible things in Syria? Yes. I believe so. Do they blow up buildings and kidnap people? If they ever did, they don't do it anymore. I think they're a militia and an armed actor, and the mass slaughter of Syrian civilians by Bashar al-Assad is, I would say, pretty terrifying to the people who are being slaughtered. But that's a long conversation about what is terrorism and what isn't. Are they terrorists as we think of them? I wouldn't say so. Not now.

JG: Has there been specific moment when this dual role of armed political party and terrorist group was a problem for your work specifically?

SA: When I write about them I just say they're designated as a terrorist organization by the United States. Which doesn't necessarily mean that I think they're a terrorist organization.

JG: They're still classified as a terrorist organization by the US government currently.

SA: Yeah. Honestly they'd be like, 'Off the record, we don't think they're terrorists either.' I'm sure not all of them would agree with that. At the time the intelligence wasn't always 100 percent accurate, and I've had that from ex-intelligence. At the same time, they also are an enemy of Israel and the U.S. is extremely close to Israel. So that definitely colors the perception of them by the U.S. government.

JG: Do you ever foresee them being removed from that list anytime soon?

SA: Absolutely not. They're going to remain there because when people talk about my dad's kidnapping and the other terrorisms they say, 'Hezbollah did it.' I don't think it's that clear-cut. I think they were certainly culpable but I wouldn't say they were responsible for the original act. But the narrative that's formed over the years is it was them, they were getting the orders the whole time. I personally, from my reporting, always knew that it wasn't quite that simple. But that designation has lasted.

JG: Do you prepare for interviews with Hezbollah members differently than you would with a politician or a bystander?

SA: No, I just try to be as educated as possible about the subject who I'm interviewing. I prepare for most interviews, if not every interview, the same way. I educate myself about the subject matter and then kind of wing it. For me, it's about the connection that you have with the subject, so I don't write out a list of questions. I keep the ideas in the back of my head and then ask about them, but I find it a little more natural and more effective to just have a conversation with someone.

JG: How can you be sure of their identity?

SA: I ask for them to show me videos of them fighting, so that's how I can tell. Cause they show me videos of them in Syria, mostly.

JG: Do the Hezbollah members know that you're foreign press? Do they know that a lot of the articles you write are for American publications?

SA: Yeah, I'm open about it. They trust me by now to not reveal their identities, cause if I reveal their identities they would be in very deep trouble.

JG: They would be in deep trouble or you would be?

SA: They would be. I would be fine. Hezbollah has now started to get a little unhappy with my access, because that's against their policy. But I don't know that anything I've written has made them angry. I try to be really fair when I report on them, and really unbiased. So I think they would've put a stop to my writing if I were writing from a biased viewpoint or a viewpoint that was really slanted in the direction of America and Israel, which I don't think I am. I don't favor them, but I don't favor America and Israel either, on a personal level. So I think a lot of journalists who report on Hezbollah tend to take that angle, that sort of Western, slanted angle, and I try not to do that. I have to interview everyone, so I interview Israelis, I interview Americans, but I also try to make them human beings too, in my writing. Which they are. People don't have access to them, so they think of them as these super human-robot men, and they're not. They're just people. On a personal level, once they start to trust you, they'll open up.

JG: Do you think that's true of all these limited-access groups, that people try to make them into these "super-humans?"

SA: Yeah, I think it's the Arab mystery around it. Hezbollah has a lot of fans. I call them the fan club. They're not really in Hezbollah, they don't know that much about Hezbollah, but they're usually leftists of the stripe that are knee-jerk against anything the American government does, so they immediately gravitate toward Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Sometimes they're apologists for Assad's crimes as well. They don't really know that much about the group. They just sort of hero worship them. When I write about these people who have very little understanding of the group other than just an admiration — these kinds of people can't handle it. They sometimes say I'm being fooled by some random person who is not Hezbollah and I think they're Hezbollah. And I'm like, okay, I have a picture of one of them in fatigues, standing next to a giant missile, outside of Damascus. I think there is a lot of that with limited access groups. I think Hezbollah's one of the most noticeable in that respect, that their fan club tends to be really militant.

JG: Can you talk about the ethics of reporting terrorism? Do you draw the line anywhere in terms of things you won't report on, such as leads you won't pursue or sources you won't pursue?

SA: My number one ethical rule is I will never reveal the identity of my sources. I just try to not exploit people in general. I don't want anyone getting into trouble because of me. I just try not to be a scumbag. If I get that feeling like, I don't know if I feel good about this, I listen to that. I think the people who you interview appreciate that. And it helps them open up to you, it helps them trust you, and it helps them come back to you.

JG: Are there any rules or guidelines that you have to follow either set by the various publications that you write for or the governments that you're writing about? Do they ever get mad if you don't reveal a source or are they pretty understanding?

SA: They're pretty understanding. My editors will ask about sources' names sometimes and sometimes I'll give them and sometimes I'll say, 'No I can't' if it's a particularly sensitive case, and they're usually understanding. I do record my interviews so I have proof that I did them, which is helpful.

JG: Do your sources ever give you pushback for recording or do they understand that that's protocol?

SA: They sometimes get weird about it, but I usually manage to talk them into it.

JG: In your book, in referring to the time your father was a journalist, you write: "Journalists in conflict zones hadn't become the walking bullseyes they are today." Going

off of that, is there any special protocol you follow when it comes to your personal safety while reporting about Hezbollah?

SA: Honestly, I don't feel unsafe around them. They don't have any reason to do anything to me. I think the leadership has interest in not having anything happen to me, because if anything happened to me it would be the biggest headache for them. I've never felt unsafe around these men or in Hezbollah territory. I think if there was any danger, it would be a satellite group, maybe like people inside Hezbollah getting paid by someone who doesn't like me. But the organization as a whole, I don't fear for my safety with them.

JG: What is your experience dealing with fixers while you're reporting in Lebanon and the Middle East? Do you deal with people who are locals who help you maybe with the language barrier or setting up contacts or is it kind of all yourself?

SA: Fixers definitely play a role in all my reporting. They're a good in to everywhere. Every journalist uses fixers. That's how you get access in many cases.

JG: Do they help you with any language barrier, or do you communicate with Hezbollah members in their language?

SA: I speak I'd say like 80 percent-fluent Arabic, but I sometimes need things translated, which I don't mind doing.

JG: How useful is social media to you in terms of the material you cover?

SA: Really useful. That's how you see a lot of things that interest you. If you're in a dangerous situation there are other people who are there to tell you where you shouldn't go, where's safe.

JG: Social media is a relatively new tool. Have you seen it come to play an even more important role throughout the years that you've been a journalist?

SA: I'd say it's always been a really useful tool. I get a lot of story ideas from Twitter, I see a lot of news that interests me and I follow a lot of very interesting people, and it's a good way to connect with people too, so if I follow a Free Syrian Army person, I can contact them on Twitter and talk to them there.

JG: Are you concerned with carrying or spreading the message of terror when reporting about Hezbollah's message, and has there ever been a moment where your work has been accused of being a platform for spreading Hezbollah's message and ideology?

SA: I think that would be the case if I report on an ISIS member or any sort of terror organization. In this case, something I get from them consistently is, "We don't hate Americans, we don't hate American civilians, we don't even hate Israelis. We just have a problem with their

government and we want to protect our country.” Whether or not that’s the case, I don’t know. But in terms of spreading ideology, like I don’t think I do that. I just report what I see and hear and then I report the other side. So I’ve never really been accused of that. I guess I’ve been accused of being a Hezbollah apologist, but I think my work doesn’t really back that up and that’s usually from people who have their own bias.

JG: As a reporter, what do you see your role as being in the Hezbollah conflict? Do you see yourself as trying to stop this group at all or are you merely presenting an unbiased view of the situation?

SA: I don’t look at myself as trying to stop anybody I report on. If somebody was trying to kill someone in front of me, I would intervene in some way unless the situation prevented me from doing that. But short of that, no, it’s not our job to stop anything. It’s our job to report it. Could I stop the Israeli government from carpet-bombing Gaza? No. So I can’t stop Hezbollah either. We really can’t stop anything we report on, and it’s just part of our jobs to be as unbiased as possible. I have my personal opinions obviously on them, and I’m pretty open about them. But when I report, I do my best to put them aside and be as objective as possible and as empathic as possible with the people I report on. I really try to see it from both sides. I try to report empathically, which doesn’t mean sympathetically. I think people get that mixed up. Empathy is not sympathy. I don’t approve of the things these people do, but I try to understand why they do them.

JG: In your opinion, is the process of reporting terror distinct from other beats? If so, how? If not, then why?

SA: Oh it’s definitely distinct from other beats. It’s usually more dangerous and you have to be careful also not to feed into this way of thinking in the West that’s very obsessed with the idea of Muslims as terrorists. I try not to feed into that too much. I report on terrorism but I also try to put things into context, especially on my social media.

JG: There is a moment in your book where you write about sleeping in your father’s old AP t-shirt because it reminded you of a different time in journalism, one that you fear will never return. To what time are you referring to and do you still think it will never return?

SA: I do still think it will never return. I was referring to the time when my father and my mother were reporting, which you know, print advertising was still lucrative, and I feel like journalism was treated with a lot more respect. Journalists were looked at as more neutral than they are now. I think it was a time where journalism was valued and respected and thriving, and there was a lot of foreign coverage. There wasn’t the Internet yet that led everybody to their own little niches so you could just look at cat memes all day and not ever absorb a word of news. It was a different time. You got a newspaper, and the news in the newspaper was the news whether you wanted it or not.

JG: Are you fearful of the direction journalism is taking or are you more hopeful?

SA: I'm absolutely fearful. I'm actually terrified for the world. This model is failing us as a society, because we're not receiving the same kinds of news that I think would be important, especially foreign news. I wish I had more hope. Until we find a sustainable business model for this kind of journalism, I don't see any.