

**Victoria Davis: When you started doing investigative journalism, where did your interest in reporting and investigating Boko Haram start?**

Ahmad Salkida: Initially when I started, Boko Haram had not existed. It was later that Mohammed Yusuf, the late founder of Boko Haram, started preaching. At that time, a few of my friends and relatives began to pick up his ideology, and some of them abandoned school. I remember one of my friends dropped out of medical school, and his mother approached me to talk to him. When I spoke to him, I saw how passionate he was; he believed in what he was doing. I asked him to introduce me to his leader of the sect, and that was when I was actually introduced to Mohammed Yusuf. The first time was just to find out what it is that he was telling them. So I began to interact with Mohammed Yusuf in his early stages in 2005, long before even his students knew things were going to be violent.

But my first story was actually in 2006 for another newspaper called The New Sentinel in Nigeria. It took me over two months to convince my editor to use the story because he had not been interested, but I told him that the growing number of young men dropping out of school was a lot. I saw the story as unique when my editors and my colleagues really didn't see anything interesting. I believe that every major disaster starts with a signal, and I believe I picked up the signal of a disaster that was coming before any other journalist in the region.

**VD: What is your process of continuing to develop other sources within the organization?**

AS: In the early stages of my reporting, I interviewed the leaders, either Mohammed Yusuf or Shekau. Each time after I interviewed someone, I gave a complimentary copy of the newspaper to read and tell me what they thought; I always did that. For me, it's a way of actually building a relationship. It tells someone: "I had an interview with you, and I didn't misquote you. I didn't quote you out of context and here it is." That is how I started building sources and respect among the insurgents.

During the Press Crisis of 2009, I was the only journalist who could go where no one else could go because the insurgents saw me as someone with a lot of respect. I also have a reputation of being critical of government; one of the things that drive them is also issues of government. So, if you are someone who is also critical of bad government, you don't share the common goal of violence and destruction with them, but you share the common goal of trying to improve society. That is how I began to develop sources from one to so many.

Today as I speak to you, I have lots of sources among various factions of the group. And I also try as much as I can to uphold integrity, because I feel as though it is integrity that has kept me alive today, not because of the support system and journalism. There have been times when there were a lot of temptations, and there are times when, if one is not careful as a journalist, you will cross the red line.

**VD: You talk about how there are times when one might cross a red line as a journalist. Can you talk about that?**

AS: When you begin to have a source that you are in frequent communication with, you become friends, kind of. Sometimes, the person might want to share a personal experience or even ask for a favor. I remember when I was in self-exile in Dubai in the UAE -- I was there for four years because of the constant harassment from the local authorities in Nigeria -- I was actually called by a long-time source who wanted me to find out the cost of prosthetic legs for their members whose legs had been amputated. He was talking about sending me measurements so I could help buy the legs for someone to pick up. For me, I feel that is a red line. That is not what I should be doing as a journalist. But, I cannot come out and openly tell people: "No, no, no. This is a red line," because he is such a dependable source. So I came up with a middle ground and told him: "You know I'm in Dubai. Dubai is one of the most expensive cities in the world. Why can't you ask someone from Egypt, Cairo, India or Sudan for this?" He agreed with me, and that was it; I escaped that.

Imagine if I had agreed to go to a medical store, had found out the cost, had gotten the measurements and had helped them to acquire the legs; that is a red line.

In the early stages of my reporting of the Boko Haram crisis, I drew a red line. I asked myself what I would do to remain professional and what line I would never cross. I think it has helped me a lot. It is integrity that has kept me alive. That is why, although I have been arrested or detained 59 times by the Nigerian security authorities, they have never once, once, once found me guilty, or have even charged or indicted me for anything. It's because I try as much as I can to uphold integrity.

**VD: What role have the Nigerian government, police and authority played in your reporting?**

AS: They made it tough for me and my children, especially my children. In 2006, I was declared wanted by the Nigerian military. I was living with family in the UAE. It was very difficult because I was in regular communication with security agencies.

Let me just give you an example. I am in Dakar, Senegal, and yesterday, Nigerian security officials visited me in Dakar just because they wanted my perspective on the recent abduction. I'm in regular contact with the Nigerian security agencies, but they went and put pictures in newspapers to declare me wanted. That was very difficult. It was meant to break me.

I came back to Nigeria, and I was released a few hours after meeting with government officials. They even paid for my hotel and sent me money for plane tickets to fly from Dubai back to Nigeria. That affected me mentally. I still have very terrible experiences where my kids walk up to me and ask me: "Daddy, are you a member of Boko Haram? Because that's what our friends are telling us."

It has actually been very difficult. I'm living with a stigma of being associated with terrorism just because I report on terrorism. I think the stigma of terrorism in this part of the world is worse than the stigma of someone living with HIV or AIDs.

**VD: The government contacted you following the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping in 2014 to see if you could contact Boko Haram to request a potential meeting with them. Can you take me back to when that occurred? What were your thoughts? How did the government contact you?**

AS: It was very easy for the government to contact me because I was a regular, frequent visitor to their offices, having been arrested or invited many, many times. I was the one who broke the stories. I'm the one who got the stories out. I'm the one who, if the government says, "We have killed Abubakar Shekau," comes out to say, "No, he's alive."

At that point, I think I became like an institution as far as the story is concerned. I became a credible voice. I was seen by many as more credible than the Nigerian intelligence system, and they asked me to come and help. I felt, as a journalist, there is also a responsibility to those I am reporting to. I have a 15-year-old daughter now and she can also be abducted by Boko Haram.

So I came to Nigeria; I was given a plane ticket, was lodged in a hotel and was given military escorts by my government. I told my source I was coming to Sambisa and he agreed. Then, the Nigerian military escorted me to a second point where the insurgents picked me up, and I went to see the girls to bring back the proof of life and discuss the terms of the negotiations.

I was then kicked out of the negotiations at the last minute, and I think that was the best thing that has happened to me as a journalist, because there were a lot of ethical collisions around negotiations, which I would have been battling if I had any part of it.

I was in Sambisa in 2014. That was the last time I had contact with Abubakar Shekau; I had a meeting with him back then.

I can tell you even now, two minutes before this call, Boko Haram just contacted me that there's another exclusive video. Unfortunately, I don't break news of the videos anymore, as every reporter would love to. I give them to Sahara Reporters and then at the end of the month they give me a stipend which I use to support my family. So today I should have an exclusive video, but I can't use it because increasingly, if I use the videos, I get threatened by authorities. But if another journalist uses it, they don't have problems. And when I asked the authorities why that was so, they said it was because I have become very credible, and anything I put out there is more credible than if any other journalist puts it out.

**VD: Why does Boko Haram send those videos to you?**

AS: I think they have come to -- I don't know if can use this word -- it has become kind of

institutionalized within Boko Haram for me to be given their videos first. They send the videos to me, and if I don't use them or if I am not online, they either resort to YouTube, give it to any other person or they put it on some of their Telegram channels. But I get the videos before any other reporter. I think that has been going on for the last eight or nine years.

**VD: When you were using those videos in your reporting, how reliable did you find them? Do you fact check what they say in the videos or do you use what they say as a credible source of information?**

AS: I fact check them because I have multiple sources. I think the point I began to withdraw myself gradually from the story was when I realized sometimes even members of Boko Haram actually called me to confirm certain things. It's more or less like a cell-based organization, where a cell member is not supposed to discuss issues about his cell to another cell.

So in my own case, there was a time when I had 16 to 17 sources within Boko Haram spread across different cells. I realized that I had more information about issues going on within the insurgency than a single cell leader who may not have access to certain information about another cell. So, I have broken a story about something that happened within a particular cell, and I have seen a member of the group sending me a message on WhatsApp asking me if it was actually true. That is when it became scary, when another leader of Boko Haram actually called me to confirm if what I just put out was true.

That has also led me to double check stories and information. If Source A gives me something, I can easily ask Source B or C because, in some cases, they don't even know each other but they all know me as the journalist who reports about their activities more than any other journalist. I've never changed my cell number in the last 12 years; I've had a single telephone number for 12 years. And each time they tell me, "We are not comfortable with your phone," I will tell them that they call me at their own risk. I can't afford to change my number. They should change their numbers, but I will not change mine because it is also part of what I call that red line, having a single number. If the security agents want to work on my number, so be it. I have nothing hide. There's no way I would change my number from one to the other just to protect someone whose activities I don't fear.

**VD: On the flip side, how reliable is the information you receive from the Nigerian government or from the military via press releases or interviews with people in the government?**

AS: In my own case, I think one of the major problems that journalists reporting on terrorism face is the absence of shared concepts or definitions of human security and human rights among public institutions.

For me, as a journalist, I believe that the public has a right to hear all sides of the story. But for the government, Boko Haram shouldn't have a voice. No one should know what is happening

about them, what their plans are. The government wants to be the only voice. And with corruption, with the kind of bad governance we see, I think this has been very dangerous.

So what I tried to do at the very early age of this reporting was not to rely on military reports, because if you have 100 journalists, 98 percent of them are reporting press releases from the military. So I said to myself, "Let me be the only person to report the other side." This is how to strike the balance that journalism and the public need. Most of those press releases would say, "Shekau is dead." I would come out to say that he is strong, according to my sources. And a week later, I will be vindicated.

**VD: You're not in Nigeria now. You've also been in a few different places while reporting on these events in Nigeria. How does your distance from the attacks affect you and the news you produce?**

AS: I think for most of last year, I wasn't tweeting, I wasn't writing. I went on a sabbatical year because the government demanded that from me. They said I was an obstacle to their efforts to win the war in the media. I was actually asked if I was Nigerian, whether I loved my country and whether I wanted this thing to end.

I thought, "Okay, let me take a break." Because I understand that if security officials are begging you to stop and you don't stop, the next thing may be and can be dangerous, it can be fucked up. So I took a break for most of last year.

I decided to resume my work on the 4th of January. That's when I put out my tweets to tell people that I am back and that I am going to remain true to myself, my country and to journalism. I started my exclusives and trouble came. I got in touch with Amnesty International, and they were the ones that actually brought me to Dakar for three months. I'm currently in a safe house under an Amnesty International relief program. I'm also taking the advantage to learn French. I believe that, for me to be able to advance my work in the Lake Chad region, I need to learn French because Nigeria is the only primarily English-speaking nation. All the countries that are directly involved in this war are all mainly French-speaking nations. Even in the membership of Boko Haram, there is a growing number of French-speaking young men joining. So I desire to learn French.

Even when I'm in Abuja, I'm not allowed by the authorities to go to Borno State, my home state. Last year, I lost my mother, and I was denied the opportunity to go and attend her funeral because the security agencies would not let me return to my home state. So I remain in Abuja in a government-controlled environment.

But lucky for me, I tend to get a lot of sympathy from a lot of international organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders. I have received grants from almost all the press freedom organizations. I also have a lot of respect from the international committee in Nigeria; they consider me the only voice that makes sense out of the whole crisis.

Also, being in Dakar has not stopped me from what I was doing. I was the one breaking the news when I was in the UAE, Dakar, Senegal and other places in West Africa. Today's technology with the phone, with WhatsApp, Telegram and with some of those social media channels, we can be in touch.

**VD: So what do you see the next five years looking like for you?**

AS: I think one of the reasons I agreed to even do this interview is because I am beginning to change my disposition. Over the years I have come to feel that part of my solitary nature has not helped me that much. I believe that I need to come out. I need to escalate awareness about my reporting, about the issues in Lake Chad. And I am trying to see if I can get my hands on either a fellowship or anything that will give me more exposure, more tools on how to secure my communications, on how to get international commissions.

In the next five years, I see myself transforming from a local journalist to an international journalist that will get commissioned by big newspapers of the world to write on the issues in the Lake Chad region. I feel that no one can tell our stories better than us; we are there. Reporters shouldn't be sent from somewhere to report on the issues, on the human calamities in Lake Chad. We should be telling our stories by now. In the next five years, I see myself as someone who will be seen as a global authority as far as the Lake Chad and Sinai regions are concerned.

I am also praying and hoping that I'm going to get a fellowship in the U.S. soon.

**VD: Then has your goal or mission from a few years back changed since?**

AS: Yes. A few years ago, I was suspicious of everyone other than myself because of my experience.

I also believe that even the press freedom organizations need to be better. Threats to reporters may not be physical, but the biggest threats to reporters are the mental and psychological effects they suffer. And I felt the grants that were given to me by the CPJ and other press freedom organizations do not solve these problems. When you give me \$10,000 or \$5,000, it's important because then I can support and give back to my family. But there has to be a system that journalists can go through for mental support, mental care.

At one point, I think I went into depression. So today, I will tell you I am still recovering from those kinds of mental health issues, such as those that came from stigmatization, that have affected me over the years. I think these issues affected me, and money can't solve them. I need to talk to someone. I need to talk to people. Just like veterans going through PTSD or mental breakdowns, I think I've had a breakdown too, and there was no support.

In the next five years, I'm trying to see whether I can support other journalists, not financially but in a way to help them be able to survive the mental challenges that come with reporting on terrorism.

**VD: Given that you've gone through a lot and have the stigma of being associated with Boko Haram, why do you continue reporting and doing this investigative journalism?**

AS: I'm from Borno State, where it all happened. I have family there and it's my home. And today, I can't take my children to the place I grew up. I can't take my children to the place where I was born. I feel this has to stop.

I believe that information is important in understanding any conflict, let alone resolving it. There's a lot of ignorance about Boko Haram. I believe that I have a role to play in shaping the narrative, in giving voices to so many people, especially the victims.

So I believe this is the only way that we can really understand the problem. It is only when you can understand a problem that you can begin to look for solutions. For me, that has been the motivation.

Of course I knew it was dangerous. I knew it was risky, but I was lucky to have learned in the very early stages of my reporting that integrity is what I actually needed to survive. Integrity has kept me alive. I think the more I uphold integrity in my work, I will continue to enjoy the support of groups like Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

I can assure you only very few journalists in my part of the world have the kind of privilege that I have. Integrity has kept me going. Integrity is what has kept me out of detention rooms of the Nigerian security agencies. It has helped me a lot. I believe, if I uphold integrity, I will be reporting for a long time to come.

But like I've told you, if I lose that, if I cross that red line, that is it. If you've noticed, even from my email, that's my signature, "Integrity is the most valuable article of trade in journalism."

**VD: How did you learn or develop your journalistic ethics and skills?**

AS: I did not have the privilege of a formal education, so I learned all by myself. When I dropped out of school at the age of 14, I think my mother was worried because I was already reading a lot of novels when my mates were playing football. My mother asked me: "You are someone who is so passionate. You love books, but why don't you like to be in the classroom?" For me, the classroom was like an infringement of my personal liberty. Why should I sit down in the classroom for four or six years before I get a degree? I believe we all have different ways of learning as individuals.

I am a nonconformist kind of person, which has also helped me a lot. When I got into journalism, I had problems with my colleagues who had degrees, first degrees, second degrees. They didn't really see me as a journalist; they just saw me as someone who was just a supporting staff member. And I needed to prove them wrong. I knew that I could not compete; I could not rely on the press releases like every other person. I needed to do something different, so very early on, I started doing something different. Then, I saw myself receiving more internal awards than even those who had certificates. That has also shaped my career.

I understand very well that I am from a very poor family and a poor background. I don't have anyone to protect me. I don't have anyone powerful in the government to protect me when I get into trouble, so the best protection has to be integrity. I have to stand by the truth. That is how my ethics have defined my career and how I have been able to survive.

**VD: Is there anything else you would like to add?**

AS: Well, the only thing I would like to add is that sometimes I believe there is this complacency from the big western countries in regard to this part of the world. Journalists are being harassed, and countries like the United States, the U.K. and other democracies that ought to be promoting press freedom continue to support local governments here, despite the growing human rights and press freedoms violations I find that worrying.

**VD: Do you have any thoughts on how reform should take place?**

AS: I think that the hypocrisy has to stop. It is hypocritical that journalists who have made their mark in promoting good governance and human rights don't have any kind of support system from countries that ought to be supporting such things.

I believe that, if these kind of countries would stand up and support a lot of the work that very few investigative journalists are doing, it would encourage other aspiring journalists to go into it. But so far, the future is bleak, and a lot of people are not inspired in any way. A lot of people are discouraged to go into these kind of things because of the lack of support system.