

## **On the Frontline: Motherhood and Journalism in Conflict Zones**

*By Rowaida fallag*

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On the front lines of wars and crises, journalist mothers face danger not only as truth-tellers but also as mothers who must make decisions that go far beyond their professional responsibilities.

How can a journalist carry a camera in one hand and her child in the other, knowing that she may never return?

We don't just tell the experiences of women who have documented conflicts in their countries; we also go into moments of fear and the conflict between their ethical commitment to the truth and their duty as mothers.

From Gaza's devastated streets to southern Lebanon, Sudan, and Libya, we uncover previously unknown details, bringing to light the voices of women who found themselves at the center of events, and became the story.

Journalists explain how wielding a pen can be more dangerous than carrying a weapon, and how journalism has become a true survival test, not only to stay alive, but also to keep up professionalism and humanity.

### **Israa Arer and Ibtisam Mahdi: Testimonies from Gaza**

Since October 7, 2023, the Israeli war on Gaza has taken an unprecedented turn, with journalistic and human rights reports revealing the scale of destruction and the direct targeting of civilians. According to the most recent Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [figures](#), 48,405 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza as of the date of this report, including 17,881 children and 12,298 women. The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ) has documented the deaths of 148 Palestinian journalists, including 22 women, indicating a systematic targeting of Palestinian journalism.

In this war, journalists, who were once messengers of the story, have become the story. Among these are the testimonies of two women journalists, Israa Arer and Ibtisam Mahdi, who not only documented scenes of destruction and loss, but also lived through them in their most extreme forms; torn between motherhood and professional commitment, loss and the determination to continue telling the truth.

## **Ibtisam Mahdi: Forced to choose between motherhood and journalism**

Ibtisam Mahdi is a Palestinian journalist and a mother of two. Her work during this war has been unlike any other conflict she has witnessed in Gaza. This time, her fear for her children was the driving force that altered the equation of her work.

Mahdi says, “This is the first war I've been in with my children. We had to light fires to cook food, carry water, think about how to feed my family, and live in constant fear of being targeted. It was more than just journalistic coverage; it was a daily battle to ensure the bare necessities of survival.”

Under these precarious circumstances, Mahdi was forced to continue working, even though she struggled to separate her roles as a journalist and mother. However, the sense of loss became the most motivating factor for her perseverance, particularly after the murder of her brother and more than 40 members of her family, as well as the deaths of other colleagues.



*Palestinian journalist Ibtisam Mahdi with her husband and two children*

Mahdi recounts her first conflict between professional obligation and motherhood during her relocation from Khan Younis, where she decided to stay in order to prepare an in-depth report on the targeting of the sports industry. However, when the shelling increased, the Israeli army ordered the evacuation of the area. At a checkpoint, she had to choose between taking her children or keeping her job equipment. She chose her children over her journalistic archives and technical devices.

Mahdi adds, “The army forced me to choose between my work and my children, and I didn't have to think about it. However, the price was the loss of months of documentation and work.”

Today, Mahdi is unable to continue her work due to a lack of internet and electrical power, and she is consumed with ensuring the necessities of life such as food and water. Despite everything, she refuses to be silent and continues to document.

### **Israa Arer: I Covered the War While Being Caught in It**

The primary source of support in the life of Palestinian journalist Israa Arer was her husband, Yasser al-Tawil, whom she lost in the early days of the war. She then lost her two brothers, and her family home was completely destroyed. Despite all this, she did not stop working.

Arer says: “I covered the war while being caught in it. I would go out to report on the scenes of devastation, and return to find my home had been bombed. There was no time for grief, and every moment carried the possibility that we could be the next victims.”

Journalism was not her only challenge; she also had a duty to her young daughter, who insisted on accompanying her even in the most dangerous moments.

Arer adds: “In most of my coverage, my little girl was with me. If we were to be killed, we would die together, because loss was harder on us than death itself. After her father was killed, she became afraid of losing me too, so I would hold her with one hand and carry the camera with the other.”



*Palestinian journalist Israa Arer with her daughter*

Scenes of bombardment and destruction shook her deeply, especially when reporting on attacks involving children. She recalls one of the most painful moments: “A paramedic was holding children's clothes, mixed with what little remained of them; their bodies had vanished under the force of the bombing,” she says. “In that moment, I stepped back, broke down in tears... but I always found the strength to return and tell the world what was happening.”

She was displaced more than 18 times, constantly searching for safety, a place she never truly found. Even while conducting interviews, she juggled caring for her baby: soothing her with one hand, giving her rehydration solution with the other, and then returning to her work.

She says, “As a mother, I had no choice but to be strong, not just for myself, but for her as well.”

Through the testimonies of Ibtisam Mahdi and Israa Arer, a powerful picture emerges of what it means to be a woman journalist in Gaza during this war.

Despite losing their homes, equipment, archives — and in some cases, family members — Palestinian women journalists have never stopped documenting.

### **Rana Jouni - Lebanon: My child accompanied me when I covered the events**

Since October 8, 2023, Israeli attacks on southern Lebanon have escalated, reaching their peak on September 23, 2024, with intense shelling targeting civilians across various areas, especially the town of Nabatieh, located just 12 kilometers from the border.

According to the [Lebanese Ministry of Health](#), these assaults resulted in 4,047 deaths and 16,638 injuries by the end of 2024, including 316 children and 790 women killed, reflecting the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe inflicted upon civilians.

Amid this chaos, journalists were not spared from being targeted. The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ) documented the killing of five journalists in Lebanon from October 8, 2023, to the end of 2024.

Journalist Rana Jouni chose to remain in the field despite all threats and dangers, bearing witness to massacres and violations against civilians. She was only 300 meters away from the Harouf massacre, which claimed the lives of 15 civilians, and documented scenes of mothers searching for their children under the rubble, as well as the scattered remains of Nabatieh municipality workers throughout the area.





*Lebanese journalist Rana Jouni during her coverage of the war on Lebanon in 2024*

Jouni was not just a Field journalist; she was also a mother to an infant in his first months, which made her mission more complicated. Her child accompanied her in the field, in areas ravaged by shelling and destruction, and each time she faced danger, motherhood and journalism clashed within her.

Jouni says: “My child was with me all the time, in the car, and in areas where I covered the shelling and destruction. I knew I was putting him at risk, but I also realized that my role as a journalist is to document these crimes, and that conveying the truth is a responsibility I cannot back away from.”

Despite the criticism and advice she received to leave the field for her child’s safety, she insisted on continuing, driven by her sense of responsibility toward what was happening. Her family, especially her husband, were her only source of moral support, but she found her greatest courage in her child himself.

“Motherhood doesn’t mean weakness, it’s a source of strength,” she added. “Journalism in war zones is not just about reporting events; it is courage in the face of death to convey the truth.

I knew that motherhood meant responsibility, but it never meant retreat or fear to me. On the contrary, motherhood was my source of strength, because I realized that I was documenting this war for the future of my child and other children.”

Rana Jouni’s experience is not just a journalistic story covering the war, but a testimony to a dual struggle she lived between fulfilling her professional duty and protecting her child.

### **Hayat Hamad Younsabi – Sudan: Being a mother gave me a deeper understanding of the suffering of women and children in conflict zones**

The war in Sudan erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, leading to a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. The fighting was concentrated in Khartoum and Darfur, resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries, and the displacement of millions. The conflict reflects a complex political and military rivalry, with external interventions and profound impacts on the country’s stability, making Sudan one of the most dangerous areas for journalists, especially women journalists.

Amid the horrors of the conflict in Sudan, Hayat Hamad Younsabi stands out. She is a Sudanese journalist with over eight years of experience in media, focusing on investigative journalism that highlights negative phenomena in society, with a particular interest in human rights, women, children, and peace issues. She earned her bachelor’s degree in media with distinction and is currently pursuing postgraduate studies in interactive media at the Red Sea University.

In addition to her work as a journalist and as a presenter for television and radio programs at the Red Sea Radio, she also contributes to the Ministry of Culture and Information, addressing important societal issues.

Furthermore, her professional life is not limited to media; it also extends to volunteer work. She holds leadership positions in organizations such as the Sudanese Journalists Network, the Rescuer Media Organization, and Journalists for Children. She has also participated in numerous training workshops related to post-conflict media and investigative journalism.

Younsabi recounts her personal experience as a mother and journalist in a conflict zone, affirming that her family responsibilities have made her more organized and more keen on managing her time effectively despite the challenges she faces in the field.

She says: “Sometimes my family responsibilities pose a challenge while working in the field, but I consider them a source of strength that inspires me to perform my duties better. Media coverage has made me more aware of the value of peace and the importance of conveying the voices of those affected.”

For her, media coverage, especially in Sudan, has brought a new dimension to her life. She strongly believes that the media must convey the voices of people, especially women and children. As a mother, she has gained a deeper understanding of the suffering of women and children in conflict areas, which has increased her commitment to highlighting their issues. Hayat confirms that

Younsabi spoke with us in more depth about the challenges associated with being a mother and a journalist in a recorded video that highlights her remarkable journey as a journalist in Sudan, where she skillfully balances the demanding roles of field reporting and motherhood. Despite the challenges posed by ongoing conflict in her country, she remains steadfast in her commitment to uncovering the truth and defending journalists' rights. Through her tireless efforts, she not only brings critical stories to light but also continues to serve and support her local community, embodying resilience, courage, and dedication.



*Sudanese journalist Hayat Hamad Younsabi*

**Ibtisam Aghfir – Libya: I found myself torn between my responsibility to complete a journalistic investigation and my duty as a mother**



According to the United Nations, women in Libya face major challenges due to complex security, political, and economic conditions, which have been exacerbated by ongoing conflict and political divisions since 2011. This conflict has had a significant impact on the situation of women and girls, increasing levels of violence, including gender-based violence.

According to the Women, Peace, and Security Index issued by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, Libya ranked 122nd globally out of 177 countries in the 2023-2024 report. This ranking reflects the deteriorating situation of women in Libya as a result of ongoing conflicts and instability.

Like other conflict zones, journalists in Libya, both men and women, face numerous difficulties in carrying out their work, such as restrictions, denial of access, and lack of recognition of their press credentials. Practicing journalism as a woman and a mother in Libya is even more difficult, according to Libyan journalist Ibtisam Aghfir.

### **Double Challenges**

Aghfir spoke about the challenges she faced in her professional career due to motherhood, noting that women journalists face doubled difficulties, especially when they begin their journey into motherhood at the start of their professional path.

After giving birth to her first daughter, she found it difficult to balance between her work and motherhood, especially in the absence of institutional support such as maternity leave or dedicated nurseries for working female journalists.



*Libyan journalist Ibtisam Aghfir with her daughter*

Despite the challenges, Aghfir did not turn to social or cultural journalism—as some women journalists do after becoming mothers—but continued working in in-depth investigative journalism and field reporting. Even during her second pregnancy in 2015, she persisted with field coverage, despite the dangers imposed by the war in Benghazi at the time. She did not adopt a specific strategy to balance her professional and personal life; instead, she followed her instincts and let the stronger feeling guide her in each situation, which sometimes led her to sacrifice her role as a mother in favor of journalism.

Aghfir recalls one of the most difficult moments she faced as a journalist and a mother, when she had to take her two-year-old daughter with her during an investigative report on the smuggling of medicines in Libya. Visiting medicine warehouses was necessary, but regulations forbade

bringing children into these areas. She found herself torn between her desire to complete the investigation and her responsibility as a mother, especially when she heard her daughter crying while she was inside the warehouse. This incident, she says, remains etched in her memory as one of the harshest moments of her career.

She also mentioned, in an audio testimony about her experience covering the war in Benghazi during her second pregnancy, that despite all these challenges, she never abandoned field reporting, considering journalism a responsibility rather than just a profession. For her, journalism is not a “hotel job,” where interviews are conducted in comfortable settings, but a field commitment that requires being on the ground and conveying the truth regardless of the circumstances.

### **Psychologist Maryam al-Badri: Motherhood in War Zones Threatens the Mental Health of Female Journalists**

Psychologist Maryam al-Badri explains that mothers who are journalists in conflict areas experience unprecedented emotional exhaustion, as the maternal instinct becomes a double-edged sword.

“Fear for their children becomes an obsession that overshadows everything, even their professional commitment,” she explains. “These mothers are forced to live in a constant state of alert, as if carrying their children on their chests while running across a psychological minefield.”

Al-Badri points out that this struggle leads to a series of acute disorders:

- Sleep disturbances and nightmares linked to the violent images they witness daily.
- Involuntary episodes of anger and crying due to accumulated stress and inability to control reality.
- A chronic sense of insecurity, even during the rare moments of temporary peace.

She also highlights a painful paradox: “The journalist mother refuses to leave her child for fear of losing them in her absence, yet lives in terror that having them nearby could put them in harm’s way. This contradiction leads to guilt whether she decides to take the child or leave them behind, and both choices fuel a sense of failure.”

Al-Badri warns of long-term consequences: “The shocking scenes these mothers experience plant a pathological fear in their subconscious of reliving the experience with their children. These accumulated traumas may later develop into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), clinical depression, or even panic attacks that can last for decades.”

She concludes with an urgent recommendation: “There must be specialized psychological interventions for this group, such as on-site psychological first aid sessions and group support programs that allow them to share their experiences. Safe spaces must also be provided for accompanying children, as protecting childhood in war zones is part of protecting the journalist both psychologically and professionally.”

### **Guidelines to Enhance Psychological Resilience for Journalist Mothers in Conflict Zones**

According to Dr. Georges Karam, Executive Director of IDRAAC and an adult psychiatry specialist, journalist mothers in crisis zones confront unique obstacles and must learn coping methods on a daily basis. The key is not only survival, but also maintaining humanity in the midst of a storm.

Dr. Karam provides a series of integrated tips for increasing psychological resilience:

- First, get professional help. Attending psychotherapy or journalist support groups is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a fundamental line of protection against trauma accumulation. “Talking about pain gives it boundaries and gives you space to breathe.”
- Protect the mind with mindfulness: Short breathing or meditation exercises might serve as a "lifeline" to save you from drowning in anxiety, especially when covering violent events.
- Writing as a silent partner: Putting horrific images into words on paper is more than simply an outlet; it's a sorting process that separates memories and emotions.
- Family Connection: A bridge over chaos: Even if you only communicate with your children on occasion, hearing their voices or seeing their faces tells you that life continues behind the roar of battle.
- Managing guilt by changing priorities: "Don't make yourself choose between your career and parenthood. Some days, the camera bows to embrace your child, while others, you set it aside to carry it into danger. This is not failure; it is a war-imposed reality."
- Resilience over perfection: Accept that journalism during conflict is like driving down a difficult road: it may shake, you may have to stop, but what matters is that you get to the next station.

“At the center of conflict, being a mother and a journalist means you carry two missions: conveying the truth and protecting life,” Dr. Karam says in closing, serving as a crucial reminder. “Remember to always treat yourself with the consideration of a warrior who deserves to rest after a fight.”

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