



‘We are trying to revolt against the model of the mainstream media in the Arab world’



How does one create space for independent media in a region in which the civic space is shrinking? Who better to ask this question than Diana Moukalled, who has been working as a journalist in the Middle East for almost thirty years. In 2017, Moukalled was one of the founders of *Daraj*: an independent digital media platform based in Beirut, Lebanon. It addresses the issues which remain underreported in the mainstream Arab media.

Interview by Afke Groen & Petra Stienen

In 2017, you launched the independent media platform *Daraj* together with two colleagues. What made you decide to launch this platform at that point in time? ‘I started working as a television reporter and as a journalist in 1991, the year in which the civil war in Lebanon ended. At that time, the Lebanese media were censored and contained by Syrian presence, Iranian influence, and the oligarchy that started to emerge in the country. It is true that Lebanon was freer than other countries in the Arab region, but we still had our own red lines. I was only able to practice my profession as a journalist under many restrictions and taught myself to work on those issues that were not being censored: social issues, international stories. It was a sort of compromise: yes, there was censorship, but in the end, we wanted to carry out our jobs.’

‘Then 2011 came, the year of the Arab spring. After the harsh and brutal counter-revolution, the compromise of the 90s and 00s had become unacceptable to us. There have been wars, crises, imprisonments, assassinations, and activists have been shot and killed in the streets. Meanwhile, the Lebanese media were heavily influenced by the regional powers, and the mainstream media have been receiving political funding. Fortunately, thanks to the technological revolution, it became possible to give voice to your own ideas with a minimal budget. That was a major shift. We then developed the concept of setting up an independent media platform which is honest and responsive to people’s needs, and in which we do not shun away from the topics that are taboo. So, we decided to create *Daraj* at a moment that was a very difficult one for the region. We felt as if we had fallen into a hole. The choice was between trying to move up or falling back into the hole. We decided to take up the challenge and to climb up the stairs. That is where the name of the platform, *Daraj*, comes from. It means ‘steps’ in Arabic.’

interview Diana Moukalled

Diana Moukalled is a journalist, correspondent and documentary producer in the Middle East. She is co-founder and Managing Editor of *Daraj*, an independent media platform based in Beirut, Lebanon.



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The tagline of *Daraj* is ‘the third story’. What is ‘the third story’? ‘Due to the polarized nature of politics and international relations in the region, you will always find two extreme points of view in the media scene – especially after 2011. Take the Gulf crisis, for instance, you either got the point of view of *Al-Jazeera*, funded by Qatar, or the point of view of *Al-Arabia*, funded by Saudi Arabia. This is the same for any major story; the people will only hear the two extreme viewpoints of the two mainstream media outlets. That is why we want to tell the third story: the independent, journalistic story.’

In Europe, many people would indeed see the Middle East and North Africa as being polarized along the extremes of the tyrant versus the terrorist. Are you trying to show that there is a mosaic of other voices? ‘Yes, exactly! Between these two extremes, there are so many other voices and stories that are not being heard. We are proud to be able to offer a space for these people to tell their stories, whether they be refugees, women, or artists. For example, after the explosion of the Beirut port in 2020, the mainstream media completely failed to pay attention to the family members of the victims. These are the stories of people who are being let down by the policymakers as well as the mainstream media.’

How would you further describe the failure of the mainstream media in the Arab world? ‘The year 2011 was a turning point, not only for our political future, but also for the media landscape. Whenever there is a crisis, politically funded media either flourish or shut down when their funding dries up. We have seen this happen in many countries in our region, including in Lebanon and Egypt. We have also witnessed flourishing media projects funded by regimes. Qatar funds websites and television channels based in Turkey, London, as well as in the country itself on a huge scale. The same applies to Saudi Arabia. Millions and millions are being spent and will be spent over the next years on media projects that disseminate the point of view of the regimes and those who are in power. We are trying to revolt against this model of the mainstream media in the Arab world. We believe that to be editorially independent, you must be financially independent.’

When you were a speaker at the Day of the Middle East of D66 in 2018, we discussed the models of subscription that some media platforms use in the Netherlands. What do you do to gain financial independence?

‘For the first few years, to be able to launch *Daraj*, we opted for funding by institutions and entities which are politically neutral. It is a major principle of our platform that we are entirely transparent about this funding to our audience. We are now considering ways in which *Daraj* can remain sustainable and, in a way, also profitable. To generate some income for *Daraj*, we make media productions in collaboration with, for instance, think tanks. We manage to ensure that 20 to 25 percent of our yearly budget comes from these productions, while the remaining 75 to 80 percent comes from funding. It is our plan to turn this the other way around in the coming five years. The question about having subscribers is an important one. We live in a region where one crisis follows the



Beeld: Daraj.com

next. In Lebanon, poverty has dramatically increased. Across the region, there are millions of refugees, millions of people who have lost their homes, millions of people facing economic shortages. We want our content to be accessible to all. So, when we think of a subscription, we think of it as an open model to which you can subscribe while maintaining the freedom to look at the content without paying. Lately, we have been thinking about a subscription model for the Arab diaspora in Latin America, North America, or Europe, while keeping open access for the region.’

We can imagine that people who want to attack *Daraj*, will say that it is Europeanised or elitist. What is the profile of the people who turn to your media platform? ‘We have different backgrounds on our team, from moderates to progressives, from a woman with a hijab to a queer. This diversity is also reflected in our content and our audience is also very diverse. It is true that it has been used against us, that we would be elitist, agents of the West, modernised, and not representing Arab values. But frankly, this is to distort what we do. We represent the people who want to be heard. There are so many examples of injustice in our country and in the region – from women who are not granted the right to divorce, who are being forced to marry, or are subject to violence; to people who just want to have a drink or an open relationship but who are not allowed to do so. People just want to live their lives. They want to be granted their individuality. We offer a decent and progressive approach that represents these people, and we do not mistreat or misquote them.’

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Would you say that making such injustices visible is an act of resistance against the regimes, against those in power? ‘Absolutely, this is the way to respond. I am one of those Lebanese who has lost their savings when the bank system collapsed in 2019. I am one of those who was affected by the Beirut explosion – mildly, luckily, as many people have lost so much more, even their lives. But I am also a survivor. The one way in which I can respond to these injustices is to continue to do my job, and to expose corrupt people, criminals, those who have led us down the hole that we are in today. Not only in Lebanon, but also in the region. I could have decided to leave the country or pretend that it is none of my business. But although I know that it is a long way to go, inaction is not an option. It is about doing the right thing for the future of the country, for the people who cannot claim their rights.’

How do you respond to people who suggest that the countries in the Middle East and North Africa are not ready for democracy? ‘We hear that statement around here as well. ‘Assad is a dictator, but what is the alternative, ISIS?’ No. When we say no to a dictator, we say no to radicals. We have upcoming elections in Lebanon and some people say that we have no other option than to work with the existing parties. No. At this moment, we are at rock bottom. Either we start building the foundations now, or we will repeat the same mistakes. In reality, there are many people here who think like me. However, we have not joined together in our protests, because the parties and those controlling the country – not only in Lebanon but in the entire region – have a strong influence

and have established deep roots here, fifty, sixty years ago. Still, the new, progressive people are finding their way and will not be silenced. Sometimes they take to the streets, sometimes they can be seen on the media, sometimes they are visible in the arts, and sometimes they just gather to have a drink and discuss. We will be defeated in certain battles, but it is very important to have an accumulation of thinking, of working, of building this country – as it has not been built on the right foundations. Of course, we will always be opposed by those who say that we are dreaming, that the superpowers are against us. But we are focused and we will not stop.’

The work of journalists comes with backlashes and security threats, both in the MENA-region and elsewhere in the world. How does that affect you? ‘I cannot compare Lebanon to Syria, Egypt or the Gulf, but we have seen an increasing number of intimidations and persecutions against people who express their views in the media. There are two court cases against me for something that we published in *Daraj*. Our editor-in-chief was arrested for a couple of hours, as a form of intimidation. We face non-stop backlashes and attacks on social media. Less than a year ago, one of the most important thinkers in Lebanon, Lokman Slim, was assassinated. This was very alarming. Yet no serious investigation was conducted.’

What is your perspective on the international support for the rights of journalists in the region? ‘The general mood is that nobody really cares about us. I do not want to put all international institutions in one basket, but the lesson we learned from the experience over the past ten years is that we must do this by ourselves. Not only in Lebanon, but also in many other countries this is the case. In Syria, there is a normalization going on vis-à-vis Assad even after all the brutalities he committed. In Lebanon, Macron asked the same political elite which was responsible for the Beirut explosion to form a new government – the so-called ‘French understanding’. In all honesty, we need support from people who think like us and who do not fail to recognize the tyrants and dictators. We do not want the corrupt political elite of Lebanon, of the region, to feel welcome outside of the region. They should be isolated, not accepted. I am not saying that there should be financial support, but I am saying: do not normalize those who have led us to this point.’ ●

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