

ELISA L IANNAONE



Thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters gather in Cairo in August 2013 to demand that their democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, be returned to power after being removed from office in a coup d'état

Shooting in conflict and humanitarian crises

Growing up in Mexico, conflict was a part of the daily landscape for Zerb guest editor and GTC member **Elisa L Iannacone**. Through her work, Elisa has always wanted to experience humanity in all of its facets, to gain a more in-depth understanding of human behaviours. Perhaps that is why, aged 16, she was already working on the ambulances in her home town – and also why cinematography was so appealing. Her ensuing career continues to take her on a journey full of highs and lows both through art and the heartbreak of human suffering.

14 August 2013: Rabaa al-Adawiya Camp sit-in, Cairo, Egypt

Human Rights Watch condemned it as “one of the world’s largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history”, as well as “likely crimes against humanity”. It was nothing short of complete pandemonium: snipers on rooftops, military helicopters, armoured vehicles, bulldozers, security forces, fire and tear gas clouds bursting out everywhere. People were running and shouting, some hurling rocks, sticks or chunks of concrete. Beyond the standard adrenaline one would expect from working in this kind of heightened environment, my body was also adjusting to the constant sting of tear gas, a feeling similar to that of sunburn. Working with a tear gas mask makes shooting more tricky but it does allow you to stay put and focus on the shot, when most people are dispersing. Sometimes your creative instinct kicks in for that fleeting moment to almost surreally search out a beautiful composition amidst the chaos.

I was covering the situation with a Canon 7D MkII and a few zooms – an ultra-wide 11–17mm f2.8 (indispensable to convey a sense of scale), as well as a 24–70mm f2.8 (my go-to lens most of the time). I also had a slow 70–300mm, which was mainly used when I needed to shoot from a vantage point, primarily for safety reasons. The classic Canon 50mm f1.8 often got me out of trouble in low light situations. Working with a DSLR, I could easily switch between still photography and video while remaining highly agile. In these scenarios, every second counts and each dead battery will weigh on your speed and mobility. I needed something that wasn't too heavy, allowing me to get up and run quickly, as well as to carry it in one hand with the strap wrapped around my wrist. The other hand was always needed either to climb and hold on to something, or to change settings, hit record or the shutter release.

Life or death decisions

I was in Cairo freelancing for various outlets including BBC World, VICE and All Africa (previously known as Think Africa Press). Most broadcasters and major news outlets tend to have their crews fully outfitted in flak jackets and helmets, however most freelancers I came across in Egypt were not. Some have turned this into a personal choice, which is more down to the desire to save weight and stay nimble than due to lack of access. Hostile environments can always be unpredictable though, as a colleague of mine discovered at great cost. Having chosen to get in close and work on a 25mm lens for impact, he was fully engrossed in getting his shots in amongst the action, when he felt something hot sweep across his torso and realised he'd been shot and was bleeding profusely. Unfortunately, he wasn't wearing a flak jacket and the bullet narrowly missed his spine. Thankfully, he survived his grave injury due to a protester taking him to a nearby hospital on a motorcycle, where they quickly found professional urgent care. Two other fellow shooters were targeted for their protective gear and severely beaten up, after which their assailants ran off with their precious flak jackets and helmets. As I alluded to above, a shot taken from a vantage point can not only sometimes be the best, but most importantly, it is almost always the safer option.

Keeping out of trouble

When it comes to travelling with equipment, each country operates under different rules and regulations. Some have restrictions, for example, on the number of hard drives or batteries you can bring in, while others, such as Namibia, require you to fill out a full kit inventory either in advance or upon arrival in the country, to make sure you leave with the same amount of gear you came in with. Pushing your luck can be tempting but can also result in a whole heap of problems, such as hefty fees – or worse. Two colleagues were arrested while covering the Egyptian protests in 2013, when it was discovered by security forces that they were carrying a drone. They were accused of being foreign spies and thrown into Tora prison for months.

Saad Zuberi, a friend and documentary filmmaker in Pakistan, who has also worked in Afghanistan, says: *"Keeping both kit and crew as small and practical as possible is always my number one priority when planning a shoot. I feel every additional crew member and piece of equipment has the potential to slow you down, especially while working in the field on controversial subjects where my priority is to move quickly and safely. It's more about what can be done*



A man's cranial injury is treated by volunteer medical personnel and civilians at a field hospital set up in Rabaa al-Adawiya during the 2013 protests; due to a severe lack of resources, they stitch him up while shining light from a cellphone

with the gear you have, rather than taking everything along, scrambling, wasting time or exposing yourself and the team to unnecessary risk. It's always good to have an idea of what you're going out to get before leaving your safe space. If you're filming outdoors in unpredictable circumstances, learn to work with a team of two instead of five. It's easy to get carried away while packing equipment, but sometimes a small(er) camera with a couple of essential lenses is all you need. I've always found a 70–200mm telephoto zoom lens to be highly versatile. Perhaps a 50mm prime or a good zoom lens that will give me wide to medium telephoto when I don't have time to keep switching and the focus is strictly on content rather than creative cinematography."

A deteriorating situation

I wasn't working with a team back then, but I did surround myself with fellow photo/video journalists who were all there to cover the demonstrations. The first democratically elected president of Egypt, Mohammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood party, had been deposed by the military, led by commander Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who has since become Egypt's president. Thousands of protesters flocked from all over the country to fill the streets and squares of the city. Building a safety net with colleagues is incredibly helpful as you all start to look out for each other. Even just a nod or look from afar every so often to make sure everything's going OK can make a big difference.



Supporters of Egypt's ousted President Mohamed Morsi protest on the 6th October Bridge, Cairo during the 'Day of Rage'



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Members of the Muslim Brotherhood walk towards the security forces' lines during the clearing of the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in, 14 August 2013

Amidst all the kinetic energy rippling through Cairo at the time, a camp known as Rabaa was created. Thousands took over the streets of a predominantly residential area of apartment buildings and mosques. A stage that would become the focus of the daily protests and chants was erected, and designated male and female prayer areas were created. As this was all taking place during Ramadan, there were cooks on site to prepare food for Iftar, the meal to break the daily fast, after sunset Maghrib prayers. A central mosque was used as a space where women could escape from the heat of the day, allowing them privacy to take down their hijabs and burqas for a while.

Witness to a massacre

The military had repeatedly threatened to clear the Rabaa sit-in – until, one fateful morning, they opened fire and killed scores of people. Mosques were hurriedly converted into field hospitals. I found it very hard to shoot in this environment; having worked on an ambulance in my teenage years in Mexico, the first responder in me wanted to step in. At the same time, many had been jailed for helping and it was impossible to even triage since we were walking over bloodied floors and bodies. I decided to focus on documenting the atrocity, with many people asking me to please film this or that, because they wanted it to be recorded. I had one eye on the viewfinder, the other constantly roaming, trying to gauge the level of danger.

The protests persisted for days. Basically, all Muslim Brotherhood supporters had been blanket-labelled terrorists by the military, and therefore the state media which is not free in Egypt. Days later, the camp was cleared by the military using live ammunition, snipers and even setting fire to field hospitals, where those already injured burned to death. That day, Wednesday 14 August, has gone down in history as the Rabaa Massacre. Although no exact mortality figures are known, the Egyptian Ministry of Health puts it at an insultingly conservative 600–700 dead, the Muslim Brotherhood claims over 2000, and Human Rights Watch estimate at least 1250. I personally saw 250 bodies in the field hospital I was covering, before I gave up counting.

Even in these circumstances, we continued to show respect by taking off our shoes outside the mosques that were now makeshift field hospitals. Inside, I covered the mayhem of hundreds of bodies being carried in, many of them with names hastily scribbled with permanent marker on the white



KANAR KAMAL

Elisa working inside a refugee camp in Iraq

cotton cloth in which they were enshrouded. People would arrive to identify their loved ones, often painfully having to open the cloth to confirm that the name correctly matched the person. Bags of ice were placed on the bodies to preserve them in the intense heat. Bottle after bottle of Febreze was emptied left, right and centre in an attempt to mask the stench – I had to avoid the clouds of air freshener to prevent the sticky droplets smearing my lens. By the time I left the mosque, my previously white socks were completely soaked – and red; I had been oblivious to the fact that the carpets I’d been stepping on were drenched in blood. My mind had been too busy looking for the story, the frame, the angle.

Cover for coverage

When such indescribable collective grief is experienced by thousands at a time, peace can quickly devolve into chaos in a matter of seconds. One must, as a shooter, be incredibly sensitive – and at all times remain aware of how far you can go with the camera. In some situations people desperately want you there, in others they definitely do not, and in many cases you just blur into the noise. The reality of finding protection from bullets is that a tree just won’t cut it, nor will a car – although if that’s all you’ve got then your safest bet is to get behind the engine. What you really want is thick concrete. I remember shooting from behind a very low brick wall at one point, with several protesters around me throwing rocks at the police and military. I would pop up with the camera every so often to grab some shots, then duck back down, but in a matter of a few minutes, the whole wall had been torn down to release more bricks to be thrown in retaliation. Nothing is predictable when working in a conflict zone. Having an exit strategy, or preferably a few, is probably one of the single most important things to keep in mind at all times.

Life and death through the lens

Operating in this very high-intensity environment, the camera certainly acts as a barrier from emotion, as well as providing a sense of purpose – which kept me focused. Everything was handheld as there was no time or space to set anything down. It’s strange to be looking for stories and composition in the midst of so much human loss and chaos, and this is why the conflict reporter has sometimes been referred to as a ‘vulture’. Once when I was shooting in a field hospital, a man who was being tended to by two others caught my attention. I pointed my camera towards him and he made eye contact with me through the lens. In the seconds it took to shoot a very short clip and an image, he faded. I never released that



Soldiers overlook Afghanistan’s Zabul province from their checkpoint

material as it felt wrong. I constantly find in these scenarios we are navigating a fine line of ethics. What one person might think is right, another may not. In the end, I believe one must act with one’s own sense of integrity.

Keeping it on the down-low

My friend and colleague, Stefanie Glinski, is a photo- and video-journalist based out of Kabul, Afghanistan, where she has the added challenge of needing to conceal her gear: *“Especially when working in rural areas of the country where militant checkpoints could be set up on the road, I make sure I carry gear that is small enough to hide under my abaya or burka. I’ll bring the bare minimum – usually just my camera, an old and trusted Canon 5D MkIII or a Sony a7 III, and a Sennheiser wireless lavalier mic set – not even a tripod (I usually just build a makeshift one or use walls to keep steady).”*

Stefanie adds: *“When working in city centres, I prefer the Sony, as it is much smaller and draws less attention. It’s a little different when covering breaking news of an attack. That’s usually the only time I’d put on a flak jacket, which is really heavy and makes moving around a bit more difficult. I usually take my 5D MkIII – it has such a strong body, even if the setting is dusty or it’s raining, and it can take a bit of a beating. I’ve worked with that camera for years and when it comes to being flexible and having to move around fast or to run, it’s still my most trusted companion. Having said that, in those settings, even my phone comes in handy, as mobile videography is very stabilised.”*



Stefanie Glinski on assignment in South Sudan

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A child looks out of the Grande Hotel Beira, Mozambique, the current home of several thousand squatters in the city



MEGHAN HORVATH

Elisa shoots an interactive documentary in Namibia while several children become interested in her shot

Delayed response

Whether it's shooting in a hostile environment or maybe a humanitarian crisis, I often find it's only later, when I sit back to review the footage, that what has happened during the day finally hits me. I was once on a bridge covering a protest that was being targeted by police forces. I tried to convey to as many people as I could that the bridge was going to become a bottleneck, as the flanking security forces started to cut off the exit at each end. I left but many stayed on. Not too long afterwards, the police started shooting from both sides and people ended up jumping off the bridge – some to their death as there was a concrete road below. I say again, having an exit strategy at all times is paramount. Later on, looking at the images on my laptop screen and hearing the sounds I had recorded somehow felt more emotionally taxing than it had been in the moment.

Keeping vigilant at all times

Although I greatly enjoy shooting narrative and more creative projects, the lessons learned while covering hostile environments and humanitarian crises ripple across my life and fuel my work with social consciousness. I believe that shooting narrative makes me grow in my craft, while shooting documentary makes me develop as a person. Keeping safety at the forefront of our work is really the key part of being

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able to successfully complete the assignment. Sometimes, the greatest hazards are not the bullets, but looking after one's health. While working in Mozambique last year, following the devastation of cyclone Idai, my number one priority was to keep healthy in order to be able to complete the shoot. In an already incredibly poor country, this natural disaster had destroyed 90% of the city of Beira and numerous rural communities were left without access to water or food. Many were forced to fish in highly contaminated water, with no access to electricity for refrigeration to preserve the fish



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A mother and child in Nhamatanda, Mozambique receive food after being severely affected by Cyclone Idai, one of the worst tropical cyclones on record to have impacted the Southern Hemisphere

they had caught. Given the very high temperatures, cholera started to spread like wildfire.

In this kind of scenario, you have to be very careful what you eat, what you touch and even where you set down your equipment. Hygiene becomes as important as the gear itself. Portable hand sanitiser is paramount, as running water and soap will definitely not be in the picture throughout your day. Wiping down gear is key, as well as staying alert at all times. I generally dress for comfort, but also so as to maintain a neutral appearance. It's definitely better to be the 'grey-man' to gain access whilst maintaining safety and mobility. As Stefanie says: *"I love working in Afghanistan, but in the back of my mind I know that I have to be careful. I try to blend in as much as possible. Luckily, the government is fairly open towards media and, with the right permission, it's easy to film – even with drones, not that I fly them myself. But it is a conflict zone, meaning that we always have to be prepared that gear can be damaged or stolen, and that it's best to work with the utmost care."*

In many countries, the police and military target journalists and camera people, which is now becoming the case more regularly and, sadly, is also getting closer to home. During the recent Black Lives Matter protests in the USA, we saw the targeting of broadcast media crews, sometimes even during live reports.

Keeping alert, having an exit strategy, staying nimble, not overdoing it with equipment, and being aware of our personal limits are all indispensable aspects of the job. Hostile environment and first aid training are definitely something

that anyone thinking of working in these areas should take. My training was with Blue Dot Safety in Somerset, who did a great job at recreating ambush and kidnapping scenarios, as well as providing an umbrella perspective of best behaviour under extreme pressure. Although nothing can fully prepare you for the real-world experience, training is great because it plants seeds that you will pull on in unexpected ways once you're out in the field.



Fact File

Elisa L Iannacone is a cinematographer and photographer with experience working in six continents producing work for outlets such as Newsweek, BBC and National Geographic. She has covered conflict and humanitarian crises, as well as shot feature-length documentaries and narrative features. With a keen interest in raising awareness, she is the founder of Reframe House, an agency devoted to reframing world issues through creativity and visuals.

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