

INTERVIEW

**Conflict through a lens: Conversations with a war reporter and a war
photographer Saddek Chettab and Michel Setboun**

CONFLICT THROUGH A LENS: CONVERSATIONS WITH A WAR REPORTER AND A WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

Saddek Chettab and Michel Setboun

Saddek Chettab became a freelance investigative war reporter, cameraman and documentary film-maker in 1989. He has covered conflicts around the world, including Pakistan, Ukraine, Somalia; wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria as well as lighter stories. He also worked on award-winning documentaries such as "Iraq: The Agony of a Nation" on the Iraqi civil war, and "Les enfants sorciers de Kinshasa" about the stigma on child sorcerers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which he co-authored in 2007. Saddek Chettab has worked with production companies and press agencies such as Capa, Elephant & Cie, Premières Lignes, Tony Comiti, Magneto Presse, for stories released on television channels including ARTE, Canal+ and TF1. In the past few years, he has focused on investigations and filmmaking as an executive producer and director for reports and documentaries on various topics, including deforestation, forgery, poaching as well as cultural topics such as sharing African contemporary art with other parts of the world.

Michel Setboun started as an architect and became a photographer in 1978 as a news and war photographer covering conflicts around the world. He worked as a photo reporter covering Iran, El Salvador, Afghanistan, among others, before focusing on long-term international stories in the 1980's such as Mongolia or Albania. In 1984, he was awarded the first prize of the World Press for his work on the expulsion of refugees from Nigeria. Michel Setboun has collaborated with the biggest photo agencies, starting with Sipa, then Black Star, Rapho, Sygma, Corbis and finally Getty. His photography has been published in The New York Times, Géo, Life, and Paris Match, among others, and his photos of Khomeyni, Saddam Hussein and the pope made the cover of some of the biggest magazines. Since becoming a freelance photographer in the early 90's, Michel Setboun has focused on long-term projects, fine art photography and books, including

books on iconic cities such as Paris, New York, Cairo and Hong-Kong.

YJIS: Please introduce a little about yourself and how you got started in your field of work.

SC: I was a war reporter for 25 years, mostly freelance. I started in 1989 and covered many conflicts from their early beginnings, including in Iraq and Syria in the Middle East. I was even in Iraq before the war, when Saddam Hussein was in power. I was one of the first ones on the ground in Syria, at the end of 2010, covering the beginning of the revolution and what was going to be a civil war, and then again in 2013 to expose the government's use of chemicals on civilians. I also covered the war in Afghanistan, conflict in Somalia, the civil war in Kenya and followed migrants between Niger and Libya to name a few.

My job mainly consisted mainly of investigation, filming video footage and capturing audio, and I also participated in the editing process and was credited as co-author. For war reporters, we usually prepare for a month, then film for 20-30 days maximum and edit the movie back home for a month. We have a fixed budget and salary with the production company, not including author rights. But with video, we can never make as much as a photographer if they sell a big picture. As a freelancer, I either pitched a story to a production company, or I was directly contacted by them. In the field, I usually worked alone or in a team of two with a journalist, but always accompanied by a local fixer as a guide. Having a local fixer is an essential element of war reporting.

MS: To make it short, for the first part of my life I worked as a war photographer, and then I was working as a magazine photographer on softer stories. My first big story I covered was in Angola during the independence war around 1975-76 and then power hand-off to the revolutionaries. I was still writing at the time and then realized photography made more money than text. I got the hang of it and was already enjoying this type of life.

Photo-reporters are paid by publication and at the time, we had to pay 50% of all expenses and sell the pictures. Once you became known, some magazines like Newsweek and Time magazine guaranteed expenses and daily rate. French magazines had no power because they had no money. So, we worked mostly for American newspapers, and on the side sold some pictures to French magazines.

In 1977, I had my architecture exam on a Monday but the Thursday before, Sipa wanted to send me to South India to cover a tidal wave. On a whim, I said yes—I was a little crazy. I got the first and cheapest flight out that had a return in three months. It took me three days to get there because of lack of transportation and on Sunday morning I reached the location. After taking pictures, I caught a red cross flight, then one to Delhi and faked the date on my Paris return ticket so they let me go. I hadn't slept for four days and took the exam. Later, I got two calls: my photos made the cover of a magazine and I graduated with honors. My life as an architect and a photographer were starting at the same time.

I thought, what am I going to do with my life? I started reading up on Iran. I was intrigued and felt like the regime of the Shah was going to fall. No one believed me, and I went there in March '78, but came back with nothing except better knowledge of the country. In May-June, protests started to grow. I was right about the regime exploding. Then, I travelled a bit with the Shah during the summer, it was a revolutionary period. I knew something was coming and I was waiting for it. In September 1978, on the eve of the Black Friday, most famous photographers had left and I was one of the only ones covering it. This moment was extraordinary and, through perseverance and hard work, this story launched my career. I started making a name for myself and I quit my architect job.

YJIS: What made you interested in this line of work?

SC: As far as I remember, I have always been drawn to telling stories about war, so becoming a war reporter just made sense. As a teenager, I was already fascinated by stories of war photojournalists and reporters, such as Robert Capa and Ernest Hemingway. Since I was about fifteen years old, that passion became self-evident—it was a mix of passion for war, conflict, politics, camera work, story-telling and mostly travelling. Considering what all of those things mean to me, I knew this line of work was for me.

MS: You have to be a little bit crazy to work in this profession. I was also focused on politics and third world countries. In 1968, I was sixteen years old, and I grew up with the idea that photography could change the world. We thought showing the reality of war could be a way to stop the war, especially because it was very important during the Vietnam War. Of course, we were wrong because you can see forty years later nothing has changed, and it's even getting worse. But when I was young, in my mind, I thought I could change something.

YJIS: How would you describe your role and your status in the field? How would you describe the main goal of your work?

SC: Pre-investigation and on site investigation are also essential. It is our responsibility to double and triple check every number and every source, to make sure what you release is accurate. In the field, the most important thing is to always know your place and stay in your role. We are on the ground, the battlefield, to tell the story of war and its impact on the local population. We tell the stories of those people, we give them a face. We are the witnesses of some key and important moments in history, and then we are forgotten.

MS: Pictures of war are not only about people shooting or tanks, they are mainly the pictures of the result of war. People, civilians, children, women, men. Those are more powerful than any picture of a man shooting a gun. Photographing the war is mainly photographing the result of war more than anything else. Journalists don't shoot the war, we shoot the result of the war.

YJIS: Are there any particular themes that run through your reporting/ photography? For example, do you focus on active combat or the aftermath of conflicts?

SC: As a reporter covering a conflict on the ground, you don't really know or choose what you are going to capture. You always have to try to be in the right place at the right time in order to get to the heart of the story. That way, you capture the before, during and after of a conflict.

MS: As a war photographer, I was focused on every news and conflict. We are like bounty hunters looking for a reward, and the one who gets published on the cover of Time magazine wins. Once you're on the ground, what you capture can be during or after conflict. We don't usually cover the aftermath, because many newspapers are mostly interested in the action and daily life.

YJIS: How many countries have you travelled to for your work? And what are the most memorable countries out of them and why?

SC: For work, I have travelled to about 50 countries, I think. Several countries remain memorable in my memories, each for specific reasons. For example, in a country like Somalia, it's the contrast between the beauty of the land, the

beaches and the color of the sea, and the devastated houses, the running noise of Kalashnikovs and the frightened faces of the children. But every face, every child, every conflict, is different, except the common theme of fear and suffering.

MS: Maybe around 150 countries, but not all of them were at war. I prefer to talk about where I've spent the longest time, because everything is memorable. One of my main countries is Albania. I've done a book and several exhibitions there. In those poor countries, very few people had a camera, film, etc., and in the 80's, few people travelled the world taking pictures. So, in a way, I have a kind of familial bond with the country.

Another one is, of course, Iran because I started my career there. Without Iran, I would have done nothing. I've done several books, including some that were published in Iran. Today, I still go there because I managed to keep my relationships alive. Behind a country, even a country you don't like, you have people. And they are good, they are interesting, they are interested in what you are doing and that's more important than politics. If you continue to be interested in them, that changes everything.

Afghanistan was also an important place for me, because I have followed the story of this country for 40 years since 1969. I was there for the first coup of Daoud, then for the first communist take-over by Taraki, and when Amin took power. I was also one of three guys who went with the Mujahideen in June 1979 before the Russians took over.

YJIS: Is being a war photographer/reporter dangerous? Are there any protections for war reporters/photographers?

SC: For security reasons, we had to change the place we stayed at every couple of days, and being a war reporter can be dangerous if you are not disciplined in the field. Each reporter has their own security protocol. It consists in having careful behavior and strict conduct when an event occurs. For example, when a bomb explodes, you should never rush in to get a scoop of the injured and dead. Because, usually, a second bomb is ready to explode once people have gathered. War reporters, with video, can still zoom; however, photographers have to be closer and take more risks. But the adrenaline never stopped and where there is action, that's where I want to go. That's also why I slowed down on war reporting, because I was going

towards danger and I wasn't scared anymore. That's when it becomes really dangerous for me and the people working with me, and you can get hurt.

MS: Of course it's dangerous. El Salvador was maybe one of the most dangerous places I've been during the civil war. I was wounded there, I got a bullet on my side, near my stomach. Nowadays, there are protections for anybody going to war, but in my time, we had no jackets, no protections. But we love it, because it's a kind of game. If I had to do that again, I would do it again because I'm still crazy. The best protection would be not to take the plane.

YJIS: In this line of work, you come across a lot of disturbing and emotional situations. How do you cope with such incidents?

SC: You can't just focus on the emotional aspect because we wouldn't be able to do our jobs. Our goal is to continue and tell the story. Otherwise you'd be doing humanitarian work. We try to take and absorb those events as part of our profession, and remind ourselves that the people we film are the ones who suffer the most. Once the job is done, we get to go home to a more peaceful country. They don't.

In terms of logistics and how to deal with risk-taking in the field, we sort of forget ourselves. We are immersed in the moments, because those are hard moments, violent moments, that can change lives. With bombs, children can become orphans. Their lives can be turned upside-down in a split second. It's our job to tell that, to tell those stories. We don't have time to think about being objective or subjective, we are just there, to capture and tell. That's war reporters. We are just witnesses, there to report.

MS: Everybody is different. Some people just can't, and some people, I don't know if they are stronger, but they do what they can. The camera is a kind of protection, when you are behind the camera, you don't see the real war. The screen of the camera is the best protection in order to have distance between you and what is happening around you.

YJIS: Does a war photographer/reporter get to choose where they go?

SC: Some reporters or photographers choose to focus on a specific geographic area. Others, like me, go around the globe, wherever there

is a conflict happening. But you always have to be ready to leave at any time. Sometimes you get a call and you have to leave right away, especially when something big happens, without knowing your return date.

MS: Of course, nobody can force you to go to war, it's a choice to go. Not only is it dangerous, you are not paid that well and there is a chance you don't come back. It's a personal interest. People who are capturing conflicts were not forced to go, they wanted to go. If you're an independent photographer, you're the one that goes to see a newspaper and tell them I want to go to Syria, for example.

YJIS: Can you share some of the most memorable incidents you came across in your career?

SC: The second big story I did in Syria, in 2013 during the civil war, we went near Aleppo to gather evidence that the government was using chemicals on civilians. It was so dangerous. One night, we were stuck in a house with jihadists. They were trying to decide what to do with us, and somehow the war chief that protected us on site got us out. That's when I realized our local fixer was not trustworthy anymore and we had to leave. Our departure was set for Friday, and my instinct told me it was too dangerous because too many people knew. At that time, the team didn't agree, but on Wednesday, I decided to call the guy who brought us from the Turkish border and made up an excuse about how we needed a car to film. I told the team to pack and get ready to leave at any time. On Thursday, we used the car for work, and then I casually asked him how long it would take to get to the Turkish border and what time it closed. He said it was easy, an hour and a half at least. Soon after, I just said let's go. He couldn't say no but I could see he was uncomfortable, and we left an hour later. We stopped on the way, something about him having to donate blood, but I didn't give him any space to make a call or anything. We made it to the border, paid him and got through. I learned that the very next week, this man was the intermediary for a group of French journalists that got kidnapped on the way.

A funny incident happened to me in Kenya. During a confrontation between ethnic groups, we had to move because a group was heading towards the journalists. I kept on filming, ran and jumped into the back of a moving pickup truck. Suddenly, the button from my pants popped and I found myself holding onto a ledge on the truck with one hand so I wouldn't fall and holding my pants up with the other hand that was also holding the camera. All at around 100 km/h.

MS: One of my last experiences, I was in Morocco in 2010 when there was a bomb that exploded in the main square, Jemaa el-Fnaa. I was drinking my coffee and the waiter told me it was just a gas bottle that exploded. Because I have experience in war photography, I recognized the sound, and I knew something was not normal. I ran in the direction of the explosion when people were fleeing to the other side. I was there just maybe one minute after the explosion, I could see all the dead bodies and people cut in different parts. I could see the face of one woman looking at me with despair, and part of her face was missing, she had no mouth. I remember just her eyes, and she died a few hours later. That was my last terrible experience. Only a few newspapers published it because it was so gruesome and with “droit à l’image” (image consent) in France, those kinds of pictures are forbidden. It makes me crazy, you cannot publish anything in France, especially nothing related to death. Anyway, one of the girls who survived called me some time ago, and she thanked me for the pictures. I was a bit anxious about it, but she said it was so important. It is important, I think that kind of picture should be shown to the guy who committed the attack, show them the picture of the people, of their eyes. Because, when you look at that, I don’t even know how to put it into words..... I remember the body of one guy, the body was blown into maybe four parts. You cannot imagine, it’s not a movie, it’s real. But people now get used to that, because they can watch crazy surrealist movies.

YJIS: What is your perspective about war and world power struggles?

SC: I gave up on the idea of a world without war, I think there will always be wars. More civilians are becoming combatants overnight and war crimes are becoming commonplace. I believe international bodies and organizations should use their experience of war and personnel in risk zones in order to anticipate and react faster. Especially when there are signs a war or conflict will break out. They can act faster to protect children, who are the most vulnerable, because they can be victims in different ways: dying or becoming orphans overnight.

MS: It will never end. War is connected with human beings. I hope there will be no nuclear war, but I’m not that confident. Of course, we have no world war today, but you can see around the world you have wars absolutely everywhere. Equality is not for tomorrow and all the social questions we had in the past still remain. I’m not optimistic, it’s just what it is. Hopefully, we are in less dangerous countries. If you are born in Chechnya or Afghanistan,

you have no choice. It's just a question of luck— lucky or unlucky.

YJIS: If someone is interested in following your career path, what advice can you give to such an aspirant?

SC: Nowadays, conflicts have changed, and what has really changed in this line of work is kidnappings. Before, guerillas and groups used to communicate with journalists. During the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict for example, reporters stayed with the Eritrean guerillas. Now, it's more about religion wars, religious movements have confused social demands and there have been more kidnappings, it's very dangerous.

Also, the new generation of journalists and reporters don't work the same way we did. Things are not being told the same way and I don't agree with that. Now war is being told differently through a new generation of new media. There are even 'influencer' war reporters, but are they sharing real information? With social media, it's become complete disinformation. We're moving forward with fake news, but back in the days, our job used to be all about fact-checking. Now, the real story, the origin of the conflict, the consequences, all gets drowned in sensationalism. Before, we just filmed real attacks as they were happening. Now, reporters ask for action just for the sake of creating buzz. If you ask for a show, they'll give you a show – they can even kill right in front of you. What is important is to create a relationship, a proximity, a degree of trust. With key words and the right approach, you can get the truth. That's when they tell you things they've never told others before. That's the key.

MS: My advice would be don't do anything like that. It's over. The business of war photography is finished. There are no more magazines, no money. Do something else, sell potatoes in the countryside. It's impossible to make money, it's dangerous, it's useless, it's complicated, and all the guys I know who did that I don't know if they survived, even my old friends. It was good at the time, but today photography is good to hang on a wall, that's all.