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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the BBC's Middle East editor Jeremy Bowen. During his 35-year career, he has reported from over 20 wars and 80 countries, including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Rwanda, and Iraq, often in the line of fire. Away from the front line, his television work includes the documentaries 'Moses' and 'Son of God', and even presenting duties on 'Have I Got News for You'. Jeremy's string of accolades includes BAFTAs, Emmys, a Peabody, four Royal Television Society and three Bayeux awards. He has also written three bestselling books.

Jeremy, thank you for joining me.

Well, thanks for inviting me.

Firstly, it's great to see you in good health. You made a very brave public announcement that you are undergoing chemotherapy for bowel cancer in April.

Yes, I was going to keep quiet about it but I saw that my friend and colleague, George Alagiah, who also has bowel cancer, that George was doing some stuff for one of the charities, Bowel Cancer UK. And to be honest with you, I felt a bit guilty not doing it. I didn't really want to share my medical details with perfect strangers, but I thought it was in a good cause that the cause was trying to get people tested. And I did it and there was a good reaction. And the NHS even said that at that particular time, more people went to their website to inquire about testing. So I thought it was probably worth doing.

And that shows you the power of being a kind of familiar face in households across the nation, doesn't it? That even though something as terrible as a health setback like that, you can turn into as best a positive as can be?

Well, I think that if me speaking out just resulted in one person getting treated and finding out they had the disease in time to get treated and cured, then it was worth it. And I've certainly had messages from people saying, "Well, you know, I heard you talking about it and I went to the doctor because I was a bit worried, and they found out that there were some things going wrong. And I've subsequently had surgery, but

I'm going to be okay. So thank you." So I've had a few messages like that from people, which it makes it worthwhile.

I mean, I've gone through life basically thinking I'm invincible and then you get a health setback and you realise you're not frankly.

Well, I already knew because of my working life that we're not invincible. Though to start with I thought, I probably was. And having cancer does bring to you an intimation of mortality and there's no question about that. And you realise that, if you didn't already, that our grip on life is, potentially it's not that strong.

And it hasn't stopped you reporting though. I mean, most recently on the Israeli elections.

Well, it did stop me reporting for the best part of a year. That was my comeback story. And I'm not really at full speed as yet. I was diagnosed in, well, practically this time last year, October. And I had surgery in November and chemo in the first six months of the year. So that is a lot of medical treatment and in that time I wasn't traveling. I mean, I couldn't have.

And what was it like to get back in the saddle?

No, it was good actually. It was very familiar. It was an Israeli election. I've probably done, over the years about half a dozen Israeli elections. It was quite an easy user-friendly story to get back to work. It wasn't somewhere that is physically arduous to work in. If I go to Syria or Iraq or Yemen or someplace like that, it's tough all round. But going to Israel, it's not difficult in that sense. And so yes, it was quite good. I enjoyed myself.

I mean, you've been reporting from trouble spots in the Middle East for 35 years. In one sense, the more I know about the politics of the region, the less I know. I mean, it seems to be the root cause of much global instability. I mean, just selfishly from a journalist point of view, what an incredibly interesting beat.

Well, it's very rich, red meat. That's the thing. It's very difficult to try. That's probably one reason why I sort of got stuck there, because after you're used to Middle East stories, other stories do seem sometimes a little bit tame.

Sometimes the more I look into it, the less I know. Is it still surprising you on a daily basis or do you become a little bit almost slightly jaded?

No, I haven't been surprised by it in a couple of years because things have been set along a certain path and they haven't really gone off that path. The last time I was really surprised was during all of the uprisings of 2011, the Arab uprisings, the so-called Arab Spring of that year because that really took everybody by surprise, I think. And those people who claimed to have foreseen it, well, they weren't that many. I don't remember them writing about it at the time. So, that was really surprising. And since then there's been an awful lot of trouble in the region. Once you get into it, it's forever interesting.

Is it difficult to communicate because there's so many different countries, so many different political parties, points of view. It's almost like three-dimensional chess. I mean, I often struggle to understand it. I used to love John Craven when he did Newsround because he would actually do the idiot-proof introduction that would assume nothing. Because sometimes I'd literally think, "Well, who's the bad guy here?"

Well, hang on. I mean, you can't always say there's a bad guy. Sometimes there are two bad guys. Sometimes there are two good guys. But scripts and intros, things like that shouldn't assume anything. They shouldn't assume knowledge. Someone should not get to the end of a piece of reporting from the Middle East confused and knowing less than when they started it. Because if that happens then whoever the reporter is, has failed. Because it can seem a bit complicated, the challenge is to do a piece which will appeal to someone who knows very little about or nothing about the region but is interested enough to stick with it. And at the same time will have something in it for someone who's a complete expert. Someone working on the relevant desk at the foreign office. So there's a big range. If you're a journalist writing for a newspaper, you tend to know exactly what kind of people are going to be reading your articles. You know who your audience is. The thing about broadcasting is it's a much, much broader base. The audiences are much wider than they would be in newspapers. And as a result of that, you have to try and tailor what you do in such a way that it appeals to a much wider range. The way that I would try and do that is, I think there should be layers of meaning in a piece. So if you approach it on one level, maybe you don't know very much about it, it's internally coherent, it explains things as it goes along, but not in a condescending kind of way. And then if it's the layer that seemed that someone knows more about it, then that person will probably take the explanatory bit for granted. But you need something in it, which will make that person think, "Oh, I didn't realize that," or "that's interesting." So that's a challenge and I still get a kick out of writing a decent script.

Do you feel more vulnerable now than ever before? It seems to me that journalists now are fair game for almost everyone.

Well, journalists are more vulnerable than they were. There's no doubt about that around the world. I mean, when I started out, well, I've been with the BBC as you said, 35 years. And when I started traveling, which was more than 30 years ago, going to a lot of trouble spots and places that weren't trouble spots, I would say it was safer then. Yes, I think that. I mean, for example, in my first war in El Salvador in 1989, journalists there used to have white flags. Everyone across the street when there was shooting going on, they'd wave their white flags, they shout, "Periodista! Periodista!" which means journalist in Spanish in a very loud voice. And inch their way across the road's, not running because the idea was they might think that you were a fighter or a soldier and take a shot at you. And while journalists got killed there, the feeling was that you could do that safely. You just would not contemplate doing something like that these days. I think the vulnerability of journalists as well comes from the fact that there's now a 24/7 media landscape and all kinds of people from very innocent PR men to desperados want to try and get their story onto that 24/7 merry-go-round. And it may well be that they think, "Well, let's try and knock off a foreigner," or even a local guy, a journalist. And so they might do that to try and get their story out there. Get their name out there.

Has rolling news changed the way that you report in a more fundamental way? Because in the old days you would do a package, it would then go on the Ten, whereas now you've got to be available live on the scene to introduce it or discuss it afterwards.

Well, my job is still very much as it's always been, which is doing a package, going somewhere with a camera man, producer and accumulating material, and then putting it together and doing a package. Yes, maybe doing a live afterwards off the back of it. I don't do too much of the hour-by-hour stuff. But no, I think, yes, of course it has. Rolling news has changed everything. People now expect to be able to just get the news whenever they want to. Quite rightly with today's technology. So it's something you've got to be in and I don't think you're really a player if you're not in it as a news organisation. You have to be in 24-hour news with apologies to my dear friends and colleagues who I respect greatly at ITV News who aren't in it. But I think inherently if you just doing this, as they call it an appointment to view TV, then it's a bit niche I think compared to when there's a big story and people turn on their TVs or more likely these days go for their phones and they expect to see something straight away. And I think that's fair enough.

How are you seen as the BBC in the Middle East? Is the Beeb seen as a more trusted news voice there compared to say, the more partisan US outlets?

Well, I mean I hope it is. I'm not sure it is, to be honest.

So it's like a plague on all of your houses.

Some, yes. There may be individuals, private citizens who think we're okay. I find that in authoritarian countries, all broadcasters and all journalists actually are figures of suspicion. And the BBC, yes, sometimes people assume that we're connected with the British Government, which of course we're not. No, I don't think you get any particular, I mean, it does mean that you're quite well known. I mean the organisation is well known. People know who the BBC is. They may have a lot of illusions, good ones and bad ones about it. But yes, people do know who you are and you are in no sense obscure.

I mean I'm listening to Jon Sopel's latest audio book and I was just listening to the chapter where he was saying about how he's doing the presser with the president. And he says, "Where are you from?" and he says, "the BBC." And he's like, "Oh, ridiculous." And he's like, "Well, we're free and impartial." And he's like, "Yes, right, next." And that's the President of the United States. That must depress you.

Not really. It's the age we're in and Trump is the man that he is. With Trump in the White House press corps, there's clearly a little bit of give and take. They have a go at him a lot of the time. He's got his friends, he's got Fox and various other allies, but he sees the other lot as hostile forces and uses this phrase 'fake news' a lot. So, I mean, I've been doing this job for a long time and I'm under no illusions about the way that people sometimes regard journalists. I don't feel personally offended by anything like that. You've got to develop a thick skin. People as well are trying to push their own point of view.

I mean, it fascinates me about the impartiality of the BBC, how they'd cover something as divisive as the Middle East and Israel. The old cliché, wasn't it, is that if you got complaints from both sides then you were kind of right. But is it more complicated than that now?

It's more complicated than that.

And I read the BBC's Editorial Guidelines a while ago and it's talking about even the words that you use. Can you say barrier or security barrier? Because even the words that you choose is impliedly choosing a side.

The language you use is really important. Language is powerful and it carries a lot of meaning. So you have to be careful just how you use it and the words that you use. At the BBC we have some words we like and we have some words we like a bit less. And there is no word that's officially banned that I'm aware of. Of course, apart from rude words.

Yes.

But words which are sometimes controversial like terrorism, we can use them but they have to be qualified. That's my understanding of the rules as they stand at the moment. So you have to explain. You can't just say, "There's a lot of terrorists." You have to say because they've done this or the other, they've been accused of terrorism or something. Find the correct form of words. Words are powerful, words are important. So you've got to be careful how you use them.

And given that often you are literally as well as figuratively under fire, is that a struggle for you? Is it quite a professional challenge when you're in the heat of the moment to report things and make sure that you're free fair totally impartial?

No, it's not actually. I've worked for the BBC my entire career, so it's second nature really. I have strong views of my own. Of course, I do. And as I get older I'd say my views, if anything, are stronger. As often happens with people as they get older. But I'm not tempted to put it into my reporting. I don't think it's appropriate to do that. I think that once you are seen as a propagandist of some sort rather than an impartial reporter, then you've moved somewhere else. In a sense you're lost after that. So yes, it's important.

I'll give you an example. During the war in Bosnia, 1992 siege of Sarajevo, there was an awful story of a couple of kids who were on a botched attempted evacuation from the city and the Serbs opened fire on their bus and killed two of the kids.

They opened fire on kids?

Well, it happened a lot in all kinds of different directions in the Bosnian war. And in fact it happens in all wars. And we saw the kids in the morgue, filmed them, met the families, et cetera, et cetera. And when it came a few days later to the funeral, we thought we'd follow all through and go to the funeral as well. And then the funeral was shelled again from the Serb positions. So I was *absolutely* furious. I was appalled. I was disgusted. The fact that these two kids had been killed, I mean, one

was a baby and one was a toddler. They'd been killed and then their funerals had been shelled. And then the mother of one of them, sorry, the grandmother of one of them was very badly hurt and we journalists took her to hospital with a massive hole in her arm. They saved her arm.

Poor lady.

So anyway, I thought I'd do a piece to camera saying, "This is absolutely appalling. This is a war crime. This is disgusting. It shouldn't happen. Civilized people would never do a thing like that." But I didn't actually, because some part of my training, I suppose, the BBC kicked in and I did a much more factual piece saying, "Well, this happened and this happened. This happened." Explaining the situation. And I think as a result I did a much more powerful piece. Like, keeping it straight, keeping it factual, not ranting. It wasn't meant to be about my response, how I felt about it.

By reporting the facts, it's going to invoke an emotional response in me, isn't it?

Yes, of course. Yes.

Of horror.

So do it straight. And then many years later, the war crimes' tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, trials of the two main leaders of the Bosnian Serb side, Radovan Karadžić, the political leader and Ratko Mladić, the military leader, I testified in both their cases. And in both of those cases the prosecutors put into evidence the piece I did that day about that incident as part of the evidence against them. So would they have done that had I ranted and raved and said it's a war crime? No, I don't think they would have. But they did it because that was factual. And so I think that, for me, that was a real strong lesson, which is do it straight, keep it factual. It doesn't mean to say you can't introduce a lot of context and explanation, but it's not about you, the reporter. It's not about your experience. It's not about what you think about what's going on. It's about those people and what's happening to them and why it's happening to them.

I mean, can the news sometimes be too sanitized. I was doing some research obviously when I knew that I was going to talk with you. And I'd read how you were critical when pictures of children gassed to death in Damascus had been removed by the BBC editors in London from the Syria package that you did.

Yes. Well, I've had this long running discussion with our editors who have got a perfectly legitimate position, which is that very often people are watching this at home, might be at teatime, which is fair enough. But then later on, even after the watershed, there might still be kids around. And anyway, adults can get shocked as well, so we shouldn't show some of the bad stuff. My view is not always, but at times it's necessary. In that case in Damascus it was a chemical weapons attack. There was a good reason for showing it and the shot in question was not gory. It was a line of kids as far as I can remember who were wrapped up in shrouds. Their faces could be seen but they were all dead, and it was a really powerful shot. It said a lot about why what had happened was shocking. And you felt a lot of sympathy for the poor little kids, of course, who had their lives snuffed out when they're a matter of months

old. Little more than babies. So I was really disappointed when that image didn't make it on air. But we have these discussions and go back and forth and over the years sometimes they've been more inclined to sanitization and sometimes they've been less inclined.

I mean some of your reporting has made me feel physically sick because of the imagery that you've shown. It's just been so horrendous. I remember it wasn't your reporting, but there was recently some BBC reporting of the Assad's deliberate targeting of hospitals and it was showing children that were suffering. And I just felt revulsion. But I also felt a sense of powerlessness because I genuinely just didn't know what to do. What can I do? Write to my MP, start buying something, stop buying something. I mean, I was more upset at my own helplessness watching it.

I think we are powerless a lot of the time. I would say to people, write to your MP or contribute some money to a disaster fund or something like that. But really we are pretty powerless to have a lever on this kind of thing. Governments, as far as Syria's concerned, governments maybe could have done something earlier on. The Western governments chose not to. Well, they did bits and bobs, and they did enough to encourage anti-Assad fighters without giving them enough for them to beat the regime. And ever since the Russians intervened, it's all been going in one way. And as of some time ago, really a couple of years ago, you could say that Assad had won the war and that was just a question after that of how long it would take to mop up what was left.

But when he "wins" it, at what ultimate cost? Because presumably most countries will treat him as a war criminal, he won't be able to travel. Is he just going to be holed down in his bunker in a load of rubble? And I wonder for the psychology of the guy.

No far from it, I mean he's in Damascus, which now is in... The centre of Damascus was never badly hit. The outskirts have been destroyed. But the central Damascus was never badly hit. There was never fighting in the streets or anything. Assad is already, you might argue, starting the journey back to some kind of normalcy, because at the moment the Secretary General of the UN is putting together some kind of constitutional convention to try to change the constitution there, and the regime is part of that, part of that process. The other people involved in it are Syrians and they'll all be talking to each other. But the point is, as far as the West was concerned, from the very beginning, they said, "Assad must go." But the difficulty about their approach was then they didn't do anything to make him go, anything significant that was really going to trouble them. And the real turning point was 2013 when there was that chemical weapons attack in Damascus, in the suburbs of Damascus, and a lot of people were killed. And Obama had said, "Using chemical weapons is a red line, you cross that red line, you're in trouble mate." In the end, he crossed the red line and...

We let him get away with it.

Yes, nothing was done. I don't think attacking or bombing the regime at that point would've ended the war more quickly. But as far as the credibility of what the West wanted to do, after that it was shot. As far as Assad and his people were concerned,

they had looked the Americans, the Americans for goodness sake, in the eye, and the Americans blinked. And they felt much stronger after that.

Well, that's to our shame that we did that.

Well the regime, when they were waiting to be bombed, when they thought it was happening, I was in Damascus and they were waiting for the Americans to bomb them, basically. And when they didn't, they could not believe how lucky they were. The people from the regime they were so relieved.

I mean you've met a lot of the key players, almost all of them. But what is it actually like to meet someone like Assad?

He's very polite. I interviewed him a couple of times before the war began and then once during it. President Assad is a very polite and courteous man when you meet him, in a very old-fashioned way. He gets up when people enter the room, if you're leaving the room he makes sure you go through the door first, "After you." That sort of thing. You know, Syria under the Assad family, I think one way of thinking about it is it's like it's a family business. His father became president in 1970, then handed the job over to him when he died in 2000, so the family business is Syria, a lot of the family are involved in it. His brother's involved in running the regime. His cousin is the money man. There are loads of other relatives, and also people who are close associates over some years who are there in the whole thing. Assad was the eldest son, well there was another one but he died. Assad was the eldest surviving son, so therefore he became, if you like, chairman or chairman and chief executive, but there were plenty of other people on the board who had a say in what was going on. Having said that, I think Assad knows exactly what's gone on in his country. Some people think that because he looks a little bit geeky and harmless perhaps...

He looks like an optometrist, doesn't he?

Well that was his job.

Yes.

Some optometrists are very handsome and dynamic looking. Anyway, I think people underestimate him. He has a high opinion of himself. If you talk to him away from the camera as well, I think he aspires to be the sort of person his father, the first President Assad, was generally recognized as, which is the man who was more or less at the centre of things. The first President Assad, Hafez al-Assad, was seen as the guy who was at the centre of the web and he had an awful lot of influence and people had to seek him out. The Americans would seek him out to try and help get things done in the region. I think that Assad Jr. wanted to be that kind of guy. Now things have changed because of this very, very long and destructive war. So the question is how is it going to play out over the next five years? Well I don't know the answer to that, but it's not going to be easy in Syria.

How does it work in terms of journalistically? Because like you say, you're speaking to him off camera, but, this might sound a very naive question, but

are you ever tempted to say, "You absolute murdering scumbag."? I mean I know you wouldn't, of course, because you wouldn't put yourself...

No, I'm not tempted to be honest. I'm not tempted, no.

Does he know that you might think ill of him? Because you're putting robust questions to him anyway, even on air.

I said to him before the interview, I said, "Look Mr. President, I'm going to be polite, but I'm going to be asking you the hardest questions I can think of." And he said, "Bring it on." He said, "It's fine, yes, you can ask me whatever you want." I don't see any point in getting into abuse with anybody, whether it's a guy on a checkpoint or the head of state. What is the point? I mean I'm not going to do my job, which is trying to explain what's going on to my audiences at the BBC, the BBC audiences, and if I start slagging off the president to his face, or even not to his face to be honest, how is that going to help that particular objective? Because once again it would be about me, and as I've already said, I don't think that reporting, that journalism should be about the reporter. I think it should be about the people involved in the story.

You mentioned about getting old a little bit and about maybe being a tiny bit more cynical, but how hopeful are you more widely for the wider region? Because I remember growing up that only an idiot would think that peace would ever come to Northern Ireland. It was so obvious that it was just going to go on forever. And then of course through the Major and the Blair governments peace was brought to Northern Ireland. It's an uneasy peace, but people aren't getting murdered anymore. Is it one of these things where you're almost the more you know the more cynical and jaded you can become? And people might have fresh ideas, or do you think ultimately it's just unsolvable?

Well you never lose points by being pessimistic in the Middle East, when you're trying to assess what's going on, because that tends to be correct. There is a real problem in a lot of countries with leadership, with civil society, with alternatives to the regime, with questions about which groups are empowered enough to present some kind of an alternative. There are problems about the building of institutions, by which I mean, courts that are fair, laws that work, police, judiciary that aren't corrupt, an army that isn't seizing power. Normally they have all of the above in a lot of Middle Eastern countries. So it's not enough, as happened in Iraq, to impose elections at the point of a gun. After the invasion in 2003 people said, "Well, we created a democracy there." Well, no we didn't really, not a good democracy. Yes, there were votes, but people voted on sectarian lines. That was a system that they were given and there weren't institutions that backed up those elections and brought a fairer society for all concerned. It took hundreds of years in this country and you can easily argue that we are in no sense perfect already, that there are serious flaws in our democracy. I think they've been apparent in the last year or so. And that's after years, hundreds of years of trying, so I'm not expecting a rapid progress in the Middle East. Sometimes people compare the Israelis and the Palestinians with Republicans and loyalists in Northern Ireland. I can see the comparison, but it only goes so far. The communities between the Israelis and the Palestinians are way, way more separate than they are in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, there were always Protestants and Catholics getting married. Different cultural backgrounds in many ways but speaking the same

language, recognizable similarities in their versions of Christianity. There was never a time when the British government wasn't talking to the IRA, even though they kept saying, "We're not going to talk to terrorists." Well, they talked to terrorists the whole time, successive governments. But with the Israelis and Palestinians, if on the very rare occasions that an Israeli and a Palestinian might want to get married, they'd probably have to leave the country and go somewhere else. They speak different languages. They live under the same sun, but actually the reality of their lives is so different. It's so different, and if anything the gulf is getting wider.

The whole situation just seems utterly intolerable. And that might seem a very shallow analysis, and obviously it doesn't provide any solutions whatsoever, but again, I feel that sense of anxiety that I don't understand it well enough. Even though I genuinely make the effort to, but I'm always scared of voicing any opinion because I don't want to offend anyone, or betray an opinion where you're clearly not well informed enough.

Well you're entitled to your opinion. I mean, I think if you meet Israelis or Palestinians the thing to do is ask them questions, explain their point of view rather than giving them yours. Unless you want to give them yours, of course, everyone's entitled to their point of view. But it gets people talking too, if you ask them questions, ask them about their lives, about what they think about things. Sometimes because it's been such a big part of their lives, the conflict, they don't want to talk about it because they just think, "Oh God, I've had enough." But other people will talk about it, especially around Jerusalem and the West Bank, Gaza, various other places, both sides of the border fence in Gaza, the conflict is a massive part of their lives. For Israelis who live on the coast, say in Tel Aviv, well the conflict is always there in the background, but people who live there often say they're living in a bubble. It is a lovely city, it's on the Mediterranean, it's got fabulous restaurants and people stroll around and you know people there often say, "Oh, we're in a bubble here, we're under a sort of glass bubble and we don't get the rest of the conflict." But of course they do, because people go off for military service, there have been over the years different attacks in Tel Aviv. I would say that the conflict, it looms with real weight and damage on the shoulders of many Palestinians, because they are weaker and don't have the resources and many of them live under occupation. That's the key thing, if you live under occupation, life becomes way, way more difficult.

I mean, it seems to be very difficult when you're talking about the occupied territories. Obama once said that Israel should retreat to its 1967 borders and they should all live in peace and harmony together somehow, and he was ridiculed for it. I remember him saying, and I thought, "Well actually that sounds quite reasonable really." But again, you know, I have Israeli friends and they would have a completely opposing point of view.

Well sort of the classic international solution for many years was always Israel goes back to the situation that was there in 1967. In other words, they give up the West Bank, they give up East Jerusalem, they probably give the Golan Heights back to Syria and in return for that they get peace. It hasn't worked out that way. Both sides blame each other for it. It seemed to be going okay early on in the peace process, but then when the Israeli prime minister Rabin was assassinated in 1995, which was just after I'd gone to live in Jerusalem, as a matter of fact, then things started going downhill quite quickly. Not because he was particularly wedded to the process, but I

think he was wedded to trying to deliver it. And his various successors were not, on the Palestinian side as well there was a dearth of good leadership. So since then, things have basically gone from bad to worse.

Is it possible to feel sorry for both sides? Because I mean rather than me trying to pick a side, I can see, I think the Israeli government has overreacted hugely in many ways. But I can also see why an average Israeli citizen wandering around would feel threatened. Again, that's not to pick a side either. But I can kind of condemn both sides and feel sorry for both sides. It just seems utterly unsolvable.

Yes, and plenty of Palestinians feel very threatened by settlers, armed settlers, by soldiers, by raids in the middle of the night, by helicopters, you name it. And many Israelis have been hurt by and continue to be worried about attacks by Palestinians, though there haven't been all that many in recent years. And the Israelis would say that's because they've got on top of it. Yes, I mean sure. But I can feel sorry for both of them. They're very decent people on both sides, and it's a lovely country. And I think that no one has, to my mind, come up with a better solution than splitting the territory into two States. They have to, I think, do something like that. Otherwise they will be betraying their children, because they will be condemning their children and grandchildren to more of the same. And that's no fun.

I know you should never, you know, when you're getting your hair cut, never talk about religion or politics, but the Middle East is both really. That polarization where you almost, certainly on Twitter, but even in real life face to face, it's the kind of topic you never raise. But it seems to be getting worse across politics. You've got Brexit that's splitting families. You've got 'Make America Great Again' Trump people versus the people who aren't Trump supporters. Everyone seems to be listening to each other even less and just digging in.

Well there's polarization. I think that's a phenomenon right across the world in many, many countries and certainly it's the case in the Western world of parliamentary democracies. Polarization is something I think that happens when people feel the system isn't being good to them anymore, and they therefore tend to go towards one extreme or the other, or towards one end of the argument, or the other end of the argument. And this idea, some people say, "Oh we need to find compromise, need to find compromise." Say about Brexit. The fact is there are loads of people who have no desire whatsoever to compromise and politicians as well who feel that way round. So, yes, I think right across the Western world there is this issue about polarization because systems that delivered gave people a rising standard of living, allowed people to think that their children might be better off than they are, well I don't think people feel like that anymore. My daughter when she was about 16, we were walking down the road and we happened to go past my first flat, which is a few streets away from where we live now. And I said, "That's where I lived. That was my first flat." And she said, "How old were you when you bought it?" And I said, "I was 26."

I bet she started laughing.

She said, "You bought a flat when you are 26? How did you manage?"

How old was she was she asked?

Sixteen.

Oh right.

So she already knew about this stuff.

She already knew she had no chance basically to get on the property ladder. But you're right, because the reporting often, whether it be in a newspaper or TV, sometimes can betray the lens through which their readers or listeners look at the world. So, for example, when the Daily Mail welcomes the fact that house prices are going up, there's quite a lot of young people like your daughter that read that and then think, "Well that's actually the first rung on the ladder is now getting further and further away from me." So it's great that house prices are going up if you own a house already, but if you don't you're screwed.

Well I think because they look at their audience and they think, "Well, we're read by a lot of people over the age of 50, who bought houses 25 years ago when they were much more affordable." And they quite like the idea that they've got their little investment has become quite a big gain. So I think that's right, you know, if the Mail was aiming itself at 23-year-old millennials, you can laugh as loud as you like at the thought of that, but if they were, they probably wouldn't say, "Great news guys, house prices going up."

Are you so BBC-ised now in terms of your objectivity and sort of impartiality that you could never present say a talk radio show where, "The real Jeremy comes out." Because I'd pay good money to know what you really think on the Middle East. And now I know you'll never tell us, and it's rightly so, credit to you as an impartial reporter, but I'd pay good money for a book where you said, "Right, I've been there for nearly four decades. These are the bad guys. These are the good guys, this is what's going wrong." You know, tell us what you really think.

Well maybe if and when I retire, but not before that. I have no idea. You know, I think that if you spend your entire career being a BBC impartial guy, it would be quite a big change of gear to become highly opinionated talk radio host.

And the problem is practically is you'd immediately lose half your audience anyway, because no matter how well judged your opinion might be, say, taking position A, there's going to be 48% of your listeners that vociferously support position B and then they're not going to listen to you anymore because of that polarization. It's what I call the Taylor Swift problem. People criticized her for not getting involved in politics for years and years, and the minute she came out for women's rights and against Trump well people were saying, "How dare she." And she's alienated 48% of her audience.

Whoops.

Well, yes.

If you're in the commercial business, maybe she's got so much money now she doesn't have to worry too much about that. Yes, you're right.

How did you end up covering that beat? Because you could have ended up being... We did Dave Lee the other day, a great guy, who is the BBC's Silicon Valley correspondent, and he's getting the latest iPhone well before it comes out, but he's also talking about how society has changed. It's a great, interesting beat that doesn't have all the physical and existential danger that you face. Are you a glutton for punishment?

Well, I suppose I must be.

How did you end up doing the beat?

Well, I joined the BBC straight from university. I went to university at University College London, and then I did a master's degree in Italy and in the United States. And while I was doing that, I got accepted on one of the BBC graduate trainee schemes. So I joined the BBC when I was 24 and I'm now 59 and I'm still there. So I'm there, been there man and boy, really. And when I joined this scheme, I wanted to be a current affairs producer doing current affairs films.

So not 'air side'.

I hadn't thought about it too hard to be honest. Probably not, but maybe, wasn't sure.

Jeremy Vine did this show a couple years ago and he said that he's got, he has the "show-off gene", that he quickly realized that, you know, there's a big pane of glass in a radio studio and there was only one side he wanted to be on.

Yes. Well I don't think I've quite got the gene in the way that Jeremy Vine has. I think that no one would ever call him a shrinking violet. And I'm not a shrinking violet either, I think that if you're going to be a broadcaster, and if you're going to be a TV reporter or a TV presenter, then you have to be, you know, you have to have a bit of ego. You have to have some confidence to stand up there and do it. No question about that. But to answer your question of how I got into doing it, well the training scheme I was on was one that was aimed at trying to develop people for top jobs in the BBC.

So you were marked for glory, even then?

Well it's meant to be a sort of fast track kind of scheme. And a lot of people who are at the top of the BBC in the last few years, well more than a few years, were graduates of it. I mean Tony Hall, the Director General was on one of the early schemes, I think. He's quite a bit older than me of course. So they saw us as the, you know, the next generation of people doing those sorts of big jobs or maybe two generations away. And I wanted to be a foreign correspondent, I realized quite quickly. And then when I got into being a foreign correspondent, I wanted to be in the place which seemed to produce the highest quality, toughest news, which is the

Middle East. So I aimed for that. And I found myself there, you know, pretty early on. I did the first big story I did in the region was the, well the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. And then 1991 the bombing of Baghdad, I was in Baghdad when all that was going on.

And didn't you turn that down in 2003 though?

Yes, it was different by then. I felt that I was just coming back to reporting from being a presenter, which I did, I presented BBC breakfast for a couple of years.

I remember it well.

And I wasn't quite ready for anything quite as hardcore as that at that point. Plus...

Presumably you're talking about Baghdad, not the BBC breakfast studio?

Baghdad, no BBC breakfast quite hardcore in its own way. But no I didn't have the appetite for getting involved in a potentially tough story. And I also felt I'd done it really, more than 10 years before. It was a huge breakthrough story for me in 1991. It was the first big one I'd done, really big one. And it was the story that sort of got me into the Premier League if you like. And you know, the thing about journalism is that sometimes what works out for the journalists is something that does not work out for the people. You know, we talk with some affection about stories. Oh yes. That was a great story. But it wasn't a great story for the people involved in it very often.

Yes. Because their kids got shot at when they were in the bus?

Or whatever, yes. Yes, exactly. But from you know, anybody in any job wants to do things that are demanding, and to do that well. A surgeon might talk about a very interesting operation. Well it's not very interesting if you've got a very advanced tumour, that's not at all interesting.

Do you like breaking news? I know it's called that now in this rolling news environment, but you know, we've had quite a few journalists and presenters on over the years that say that, you know, it's quite thrilling to literally just tell people the thing that they need to know that's just happened.

Oh no, that's, that's got to be one of the great appeals. And some of my most satisfying moments have been when you think, I have an incredible story here. And I'm going to put it together in the course of the next couple of hours, and people are going to be blown away by it. And that is a very... you know, you're in your car going back to where you're going to edit, and you've got the material, you know you can put it together, you might even have enough time to put it together. That is a very good story. Very good feeling. And yes, it's... I think to be in this sort of job, you need to be the kind of person who likes to say, "Hey, you'll never guess this. You'll never guess," and then tell people.

Did you enjoy being in the BBC breakfast studio, reading from the autocue and chatting and interviewing people?

Not to start with? I hated it to start with. Because a big story had broken out in my old patch in Jerusalem where I'd just left after five years. And then I was finding myself having to ask people about it in two-ways, when I thought I could probably answer quite well too. I found that frustrating. I had to get up at 3:30 in the morning, which I also found a little difficult. But you know, I only did a couple of years, but I did get to quite like it actually, because I had a very good co-presenter, Sophie Raworth, who still is a very dear friend of mine. And she made things better. You know, she helped me and encouraged me and all those sort of things.

I knew she was going to have a great future ahead of her, she used to present Look North back in the day.

Yes, she did. That's where she started out.

And I used to live in York, so she used to do... with Harry Gration, no less.

Harry's a great guy. Yes. Harry's... when I was a trainee at the BBC, Harry used to come down to London to do the weekend sports presenting.

He did.

And sometimes on a really good day, they would get me to work with Harry and write his scripts. Well, he'd write most of them himself, but write a few of them. And he'd write ten scripts in the time it took me to write one, probably. And anyway, he's a very, very nice man. And I know he very often gets the annual RTS awards, Royal Television Society awards. He very often gets Regional Presenter of the Year.

And he deserves it. I'd love to get him on here.

And he deserves it. He's very good at what he does, yes.

He went to run the, was it the PR for the rugby league or something for about five or six years?

Did he?

And then he came back because basically there was an outcry. It wasn't Look North without Harry.

No. Oh well, there is no celebrity greater than being a regional TV presenter, I think. It's huge. You know, you're a very big figure.

Well, Gordon Burns did it. I mean Nick Owen does it now even.

Yes, people like... people, yes it's... you enter people's lives in a different kind of way I think.

What's next for you? More of the same?

Well, you know, if someone wants to offer me a life changing sum of money to do something else, you know, I'd certainly consider it. But...

Presumably there's no life-changing sums of money offered by the BBC because they don't have any, they don't have that money anymore now?

No, not exactly, no.

Is it delivering more for less? I think that's the W1A version, isn't it?

Probably. No, so I've got a great job. I'm very lucky. You know, I've got one of the best jobs in journalism. It's not for everybody what I do, but you know, if you want to be a TV reporter, I don't think there's a better job than the one that I've been doing now for some time. You have to see what else happens. I certainly have got no intention of retiring, or anything like that. I've got years left in me. I mean, my main thing at the moment is working on my health. Before I had my diagnosis of cancer, I'd been working out in the gym pretty consistently for a few years. Having gone back to it. And I was fit, actually.

I was going to say, wouldn't that put you in better stead to fight the cancer?

I think so. I think it might've helped me with the operation. And with the resistance to the chemo, perhaps. Who knows? But you know, in the end the chemo does get to you. It did to me.

I have family members that have had chemotherapy. We were discussing before the podcast started about neuropathy and all these kinds of things. There's some horrendous side issues. It demeans it to even call it a side issue frankly.

No, it's horrible. There aren't many upsides to cancer, frankly. And the treatment is not easy. But you know, it's better than the alternative.

You mentioned about your friendship with Sophie. I've seen the tweets where you, there's Piers Morgan, Susanna Reid and Sophie, and you meet every so often don't you in the Ivy for drinks?

Well not necessarily the Ivy, but we have been in the Ivy.

It seems great fun. If there's a regular schedule, maybe I can stalk you...

It'd be very nice.

... and just appear on the next table.

Well Sophie and I used to have lunch with Piers when we were presenting breakfast, which was nearly 20 years ago. And he was the editor of the Mirror at the time. And you know, we were young people, young-ish people, and sometimes they'd become very long lunches. And yes, so they've continued and he, Piers is the organizer in chief, and pulls in a revolving cast of people. But the last one we had, I think it was the last one, was yes, it was with, with Susanna and Sophie, myself and Piers. And it was a very, very pleasant lunch. Not in the Ivy, actually, in a Spanish place in West London.

He's very sensibly turned me down quite a few times. Neil Thompson's his editor, and he's done this. And I said, "I'd love Piers on," and he said, "Well," he said, "I'll give you his personal email address, but only on condition that you reveal it was me in the email." So I said, "Oh, hi Piers," you know, "Neil's given me your email address, would you come on the this podcast?" And he replied. He said, "Well, thank you. But you know, if you were me, would you come on? Be honest." And I said, "Probably not." And he said, "Well there's your answer."

Piers is a great guy. I mean, he's a good friend of mine. And he is, you know, he's very dedicated to his family, to his wider family as well as his, you know, his wife and kids. He's a really sharp journalist. Yes, I know some people don't like his public persona and you know, but that's the way that, you know, that's the, that's the public Piers.

I think he's brilliant.

He's a brilliant broadcaster.

He's a brilliant journalist as well.

Yes.

I actually have ITV Good Morning Britain on series link. And when I get home at night, I always watch the first 10 minutes, the 6:00 AM bit when he's ranting and raving. And Neil calls that the 6:00 AM club. There's quite a few people like me that just want to watch that first 10 minutes. Because they don't even get to the news till quarter by six. They just prod him and he just has a go. And it's brilliant television.

No, he's great. I mean, I bet they are delighted to have him there.

But it would never work on the BBC, would he? Because he's too opinionated. He couldn't rant and rave for seven minutes on vegan sausage rolls for example.

We don't do that kind of opinionated presenting.

And you've already ruled out that kind of opinionated presenting 20 minutes earlier in this podcast.

Well there you go. But you never know if a life-changing changing of money, I might even try it. But no, I don't think, no, I'm very happy at the BBC. And the BBC has been good to me, has given me many opportunities to you know, it's been a real privilege actually over many years, to go to so many parts of the world. So many big stories, world shaking stories, and have the chance to be the person who communicates them to our very large audience. Not just in this country, but really all around the world. And you know, and they have been good employers to me as well, in the course of my illness. So no, I'm a big fan of the BBC.

Last couple of questions then. What's the thing that you've done in your career, if you could pick one of which you're most proud? I mean, for example, we've glossed over the fact you've written three best sellers.

Mm. Well, you know, I can't point to one particular thing. I can't point to one particular thing. And I mean, I can't even tell you which my favourite places are. I've got a list, but... The reporting I did from Bosnia in the '90s, definitely. And stuff I've done from the Middle East. Lots of stories. From the assassination of Rabin in '95 to earlier than that, the '91 Gulf War. Everything that's happened since, you know, and since 2011 as well. There have been so many stories that I'm really loath to try to elevate one ahead of all the others. Because there are so many, and what's great is the chance I've had to, you know, deal with human beings and with human nature, in all its glory. You know, you see the absolute worst of human nature. I've seen the worst of human nature, but I've also seen the best of human nature.

Yes. Because I can't remember who said it, but one person famously said, "There's really two types of people, those that are kind, those that are decent, and those that aren't." Do you think it is as divided as that?

Well I think it might be a tiny bit more complicated than that. There are people as well who might start out quite kind and decent, but circumstances push them in a very different direction. And so there are, you know, what's bad about humans and what's good about them, can sometimes coexist in the same person.

The psychology of people must interest you, because like you say, you see the good and the bad.

Yes, I do. And you know, the world at the moment is a difficult and dangerous place. People are unhappy. I'm not just talking about people who are involved in wars. People are just generally unhappy very often with their lives.

Stressed out, busy, overworked. Emails coming in all the time.

Yes, yes. Exactly. You know, they're finding it hard to switch off. And that's if they're lucky enough to have a job.

And the uncertainty over globalization, and all of these kind of things.

Yes. And that's why, you know, simple messages coming from sometimes unscrupulous politicians, populist type politicians, who aren't interested in the subtleties of an argument, they're interested in a very simple and direct message, that can be a very effective way of communicating with people who are really dissatisfied with the lives that they have.

What advice would you give to someone starting out in their career in journalism that's inspired by your journey, that wants to be the next you, that wants to be the next BBCs Middle East correspondent? Would you tell them not to bother?

No, I wouldn't. I would say well, first of all, get some decent training. You know, this is not rocket science, there are some things you need to know. There's some very good postgraduate courses.

Well, if Tommy Robinson would've gone on one of them, he might have avoided what? 12 months in prison, just from simply knowing that you can't report the proceedings of a trial saying someone's guilty before, you know?

Yes, who knows. Yes, so get some training. That's a very important thing for a journalist. And then be aware of what's going on in your world. Whatever world you're in, whichever part of the world you're in, you know, have some interest in what's happening. And think of ways as well in which you can tell the story to other people. I remember years ago when I was just starting out, in the days after the Six O'clock News, everybody would go to the bar. It doesn't happen now, there's no drinking. But back then there was, this was in the '80s.

Wow. Who was anchoring then? The earliest I can remember on the Six O'Clock News was Nicholas Witchell. I can remember the blue graphics.

Oh well yes. Yes. Yes. He's not a drinker, Nicholas. But you see a lot of people from the production team and so on, they'd be having a few drinks. And I was talking to one of the other, one of the senior reporters. And he said, "You know, this game, this job, it's not that difficult. You know, you're telling a story to someone. And it's like, imagine you're in the bar." He said, "You're telling a story and you know, you'll never guess. You say to them, "Look, you'll never guess what I've heard. Well this is going on. And that's going on." And saying, "And you'll never guess, you know, this is happening." And you explain the whole thing like that." And if you think of it in those terms, it might seem much simpler. But I would say to people interested in journalism, it's, there are loads of opportunities, many ways into it, probably more ways into it than there were when I started out. And it's certainly given me an extremely interesting 35 years and many more to come, I hope. And I would certainly, if they want to do it, I'd recommend it. You know, there's a price sometimes attached to anything that's good. Nothing in life comes free. And to be the kind of journalist that I've been, and not everybody, most journalists don't have this kind of career because they don't travel so much, and so on. For many years, I don't tend to do it now, but for many years I would leave at the drop of a hat. I would not turn up to parties, even parties given for me. I would miss things. You know, friends of mine have been killed. One friend and colleague of mine was killed while I was with him. You know, these things all leave a mark.

I don't doubt it.

And you know, I was shot with buckshot once. I've been robbed at gunpoint. I've been bashed around. I've been thrown into jail, been arrested. I've had my life threatened on numerous occasions. I've been in situations where there's been, you know, air strikes or shelling and I've thought, "I'm going to die now."

I mean cumulatively that can't be good.

There's a lot of miles on the clock. Yes, I've also at the same time done some amazing stories. And sometimes those less than ideal experiences are part of the,

you know, the overall picture. But what I'm saying is that being a foreign correspondent, and the kind of foreign correspondent that I've been is, it's not for everybody. And really the fairly small group of us who do it, and over the years, you know, I've met them in hotels all around the world. It's, as I say, it's not for everybody, but there is a price attached. There's a price tag.

Do you think you'll always do this, or do you think you'll sort of semi retire and go and work at a local butchers or something? You know, something completely different. Because you could be forgiven if you said, "Well, for the next 10 years I'd quite like to do something where everyone isn't out to kill me." You know, because that's a lot of pain, psychological and physical that you've just...

Well I don't just go to out and out wars, you know. I do other stuff as well in the region. That's my turf as it were. And the BBC's quite keen to keep people on their reservations. I don't know. I don't want to be running around in war zones I'd say forever. No, I certainly don't. But we'll see what happens. You know, I just need a good offer.

Jeremy it's been a hugely, hugely interesting conversation. And I'm so grateful that you took the time to do the podcast. Thank you.

Well, it's been a pleasure. Thank you very much.