

Journalists Face Chaos and Crisis in Afghanistan

When Taliban fighters took over Kabul on Aug. 15, 2021, all journalists remaining in Afghanistan were at extremely high risk of retaliation from the Taliban, whether they were foreign nationals who provided assistance to Western commercial media organizations, journalists with the U.S. Agency for Global Media, or Afghanistan's own journalists.

Foreign Nationals Who Assisted Western Commercial Media Organizations

In early August 2021, *The New York Times* reported that a refugee program with the U.S. State Department had been expanded, allowing Afghans employed by U.S. media organizations to be eligible for resettlement in the United States. Due to the danger many of these people faced from the Taliban, there was a rush to take advantage of that program and escape the country.

According to an August 19, 2021 *New York Times* report, the publishers of *The Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* banded together to help foreign nationals who had assisted Western journalists escape. By August 15, a number of bureaus had closed and the situation in Kabul had become chaotic; some of the foreign nationals who had helped Western journalists feared that Taliban forces would go door to door in search of them.

Although U.S. military forces had secured a portion of the Hamid Karzai International Airport, reaching the airport and gaining access to the terminal was nearly impossible. *The Times* reported that on August 15 that a group of more than 200 people connected to the *Times*, *Journal*, and *Post* traveled to the airport in hopes of leaving the country. They were greeted by scenes of mass confusion; later, when Taliban forces arrived, the situation grew even more dangerous, and the group left.

In reaction to these difficulties, the leaders of the *Times*, *Journal*, and *Post* reached out to diplomatic contacts in countries with embassies in Afghanistan, hoping to find safe harbor and transportation for their employees. "There were many plans and many efforts that either failed or fell apart," Michael Slackman, an assistant managing editor for the *Times* was quoted as saying in an August 19 *New York Times* article. "You'd have a plan at night and two hours later the circumstances on the ground would have shifted."

The newspaper publishers reached out to President Joe Biden's administration hoping to get help to evacuate their Afghan colleagues, resulting in discussions among White House officials, the Pentagon, and the State Department. *The New York Times* noted the following efforts to help journalists escape the country in its August 19 report:

- On August 17, 13 people from *The Washington Post* — including two Afghan employees and their families, together with an American correspondent — were able to leave on an American military transport headed for Qatar.
- On August 20, employees of the *Times* and their families made their way to the airport and finally made their way through a gate where they were assisted by two *Times* foreign correspondents, Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff. Gibbons-Neff, a former Marine, had initially left Kabul, but later returned to stay at the American-occupied wing of the airport and help advise foreign nationals on how and when to best approach the terminal.
- Also on August 20, Almar Latour, the publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*, announced that 76 Afghan colleagues and their families were able to leave Afghanistan, and four more people were “en route to safety.” Latour thanked the government of Qatar for its assistance, saying that the company appreciated “the efforts of U.S. government and military officials in a fluid and difficult situation.” Qatar, which is home to a U.S. military base, has ties to both the United States and Afghanistan, and has a relationship with Taliban leaders.
- The same week, the government of Qatar agreed to help a group of 128 people from the *Times* make their way to safety.

On September 30, *USA Today* published a story about the escape of one of their freelance journalists, Fatema Hosseini, as an example of what journalists endured as they tried to leave Afghanistan. The story is available online at: <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/world/2021/09/30/afghanistan-evacuation-fatema-hosseini-escape-taliban-checkpoints-kabul-airport/5822817001/>.

Foreign Nationals Who Assisted the U.S. Agency for Global Media Also Stranded in Afghanistan

The U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which runs Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), also had staffers stranded in Afghanistan, according to an Aug. 26, 2021 article in the *Washington Monthly*. *The Washington Post* reported on Aug. 15, 2021 that approximately 600 employees,

contractors, and family members were affiliated with the USAGM. Since 2016, four RFE/RL journalists had lost their lives in suicide bomb attacks, and many of them routinely received death threats from extremists, according to *The Washington Post*. On September 2, NBC News noted that a fifth journalist was also assassinated in 2020.

Although *The Washington Post* reported that RFE/RL journalists and their families repeatedly made their way to the Kabul airport, they never managed to get inside. At one point, Jamie Fly, RFE/RL's President, was on the phone with senior military officials who were trying to admit a group of RFE/RL journalists to the airport, but the orders never reached the U.S. soldiers guarding the gate where the journalists were waiting. The journalists returned to their homes.

Other attempts to gain safe passage for RFE/RL journalists included securing seats for them on a Czech airplane, but again, the journalists were refused admittance to the airport, *The Washington Post* reported. Another effort involved chartering three planes headed for Spain, but an attack on the airport in Kabul by the Islamic State forced the Pentagon to cancel all scheduled charters. Nevertheless, a military flight organized by the Ukrainian government was successful in departing Kabul, enabling an unspecified number of journalists to escape, as reported by NBC News on Sept. 2, 2021.

The State Department told USAGM that their employees would be included with the remaining locally-employed U.S. government staff. But the August 31 deadline came and went, and USAGM employees never received a call to go to the airport, *Washington Post* columnist Josh Rogin reported.

The Washington Post noted that the RFE/RL believed that the Biden administration had assured the organization that its employees would be cared for. However, Rogin stated in his August 31 article that administration officials deny that any explicit promises were made. Fly told *The Washington Post*, "You would have expected that the United States government, which helped create a space for journalism and civil society in Afghanistan over the last 20 years, would have tried to do more over the last several weeks to assist journalists who made a decision that it was best for them to leave the country. But they consistently failed to do that."

The situation led 67 members of Congress to send a bipartisan letter to President Biden stating, "We stress to you that the 550 employees and their families are no different from journalists you have already doggedly worked to evacuate." Noting that the VOA journalists at the airport were desperate, the letter continued, "They have been and continue to be a target for the Taliban due to

their association with the United States government.” No further information regarding the fate of USAGM employees left in Afghanistan was available at the time the *Bulletin* went to press. A photo of the letter was posted on Twitter by *New York Times* media columnist Ben Smith. It is available online at: <https://twitter.com/benyt/status/1430623797955149830/photo/1>.

Afghanistan's Own Journalists Endangered with Taliban's Return to Power

The situation for Afghanistan's own journalists is equally fraught with danger. The journalists faced censorship, shutdowns, beatings, and arrests with the Taliban's return to power, as well as the announcement of “11 Journalism Rules” at a meeting with the media that the Taliban ordered must be followed. These actions have prompted concern by media advocates around the world.

According to a Sept. 11, 2021 article published by *The New York Times*, Afghan media outlets had blossomed after the Taliban was ousted in 2001. “Media and entertainment were more broadly transformed, as the United States financed television networks, newspapers and radio stations, helping them reach millions of Afghans throughout the country.” In July 2021, the then-minister of information and culture, Qasim Wafayezada, reported that there were 248 television networks, 438 radio stations, 1,669 print outlets, and 119 news agencies active in the country.

However, when the Taliban returned to power, “everything changed overnight for the media,” Wafayezade said. Reality and music shows, along with Turkish and Indian soap operas have gone off the air, and Tolo News, Afghanistan's largest broadcaster, stopped producing a weekly political comedy program. Although there had been many female television presenters working across the country, at the time of *The New York Times* report, that number had dropped to four.

In a video posted by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Arlene Getz, CPJ's Editorial Director, stated that the situation for Afghanistan's journalists is “The worst crisis CPJ has had to work with.” The video is available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_KC37dzQdQ.

The New York Times reported on September 11 that journalists covering protests are rounded up along with protesters, then subjected to abuse. At least 19 journalists were detained on September 7 and 8; some were tied up and beaten with cables. They were told by Taliban guards, “You're lucky you have not been beheaded.” The journalists included those with Tolo News, Ariana News, Pajhwok News Agency, and several freelance journalists.

The *Washington Monthly* wrote that the Taliban had posted armed soldiers outside the compound of Tolo News, and that there have been raids on the homes of at least six journalists during mid-August. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) noted that “hundreds” of journalists had gone into hiding or were trying to flee the country, and that approximately 100 media outlets had stopped operating. The media outlets that were continuing to operate were doing so in accordance with the conditions set up by the Taliban.

In addition to these restrictions and abuses, “11 Journalism Rules” were unveiled by Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi, the interim director of the Government Media and Information Centre (GMIC) at a meeting with Afghan media on September 19, according to RSF. The GMIC is the central point of contact for Afghan Government communications, according to the website, “Who Is Who In Afghanistan,” available online at: http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=572&task=view&total=776&start=253&Itemid=2.

RSF noted that initially some of the rules might seem reasonable “as they include an obligation to respect ‘the truth’ and not ‘distort the content of the information.’ But in reality they are extremely dangerous because they open the way to censorship and persecution.”

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the rules are binding and apply to all journalists and media organizations across Afghanistan. The rules forbid journalists and media outlets to publish or broadcast stories that are “contrary to Islam,” invade privacy, or insult national figures. Media organizations and journalists are not to “distort news content;” they must “follow the principles of journalism;” “keep reporting balanced,” and maintain neutrality. Other rules allow Taliban control of news output and to restrict content that has not been “officially confirmed” or that may be considered harmful to the public. Additional rules specify that news production must align with “Taliban ideology.” Finally, all journalists and media must coordinate with the GMIC when reporting. The IFJ’s report is available online at: <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/afghanistan-draconian-media-rules-set-to-further-strangle-media.html>.

RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said of the Taliban’s new rules, “Decreed without any consultation with journalists, these new rules are spine chilling because of the coercive use that can be made of them, and they bode ill for the future of journalistic independence and pluralism in Afghanistan. They establish a regulatory framework based on principles and methods that

contradict the practice of journalism and leave room for oppressive interpretation, instead of providing a protective framework allowing journalists, including women, to go back to work in acceptable conditions. These rules open the way to tyranny and persecution.”

On Aug. 16, 2021, RSF requested an “Arria formula” meeting of the United Nations Security Council to discuss the situation of journalists and the media in Afghanistan. According to RSF, an “Arria formula” meeting is one that does not comply with the Security Council’s normal requirements, but would open discussion to government representatives, actors and experts. Leading Afghan journalists would be invited to address the Council and to appeal for an emergency plan for Afghan journalism. RSF said that the plan would include:

- Guarantees for the safety and protection of Afghan journalists and media wherever they might be;
- Help for journalists in Afghanistan who want to leave the country, including simplified procedures for obtaining visas and payment of travel costs;
- The creation of a fund to cover the immediate needs of Afghan journalists and media wherever they are located;
- Coordination and consultation with regard to the sustainability of Afghan media outlets and their possible transfer abroad;
- Assistance for Afghan organizations such as the Centre [sic] for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists and the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee.

The full RSF report is available online at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-seeks-un-security-council-meeting-plight-journalists-afghanistan>.

In October 2021, the VOA reported that Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban’s top spokesman and deputy minister of information and culture, said that press freedom is still alive and well. “Reporters can write and publish anything that is factual and not a mere accusation,” Masood Farivar wrote in an October 12 report, but noted that “the Taliban have pursued a two-pronged media strategy, projecting a press-friendly image to the outside world by holding regular press conferences while clamping down, sometimes by force.” The VOA article is available online at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-the-taliban-control-afghan-media/6267846.html>.

— Elaine Hargrove

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