

SIGAR

Special Inspector General for
Afghanistan Reconstruction

OCT 30
2022

QUARTERLY REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS





SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR
AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

To Congress, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the American people, I am pleased to submit SIGAR's 57th quarterly report on the status of reconstruction in Afghanistan.

The United States remains Afghanistan's single largest donor, having provided more than \$1.1 billion in assistance to support the Afghan people since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. However, SIGAR, for the first time in its history, is unable this quarter to provide Congress and the American people with a full accounting of this U.S. government spending due to the noncooperation of several U.S. government agencies. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which administers the majority of U.S. government spending for Afghanistan, and the Treasury Department refused to cooperate with SIGAR in any capacity, while the State Department was selective in the information it provided pursuant to SIGAR's audit and quarterly data requests, sharing high-level funding data but not details of agency-supported programs in Afghanistan. This is in direct violation of Section 1229(h)(5)(A) of the NDAA for FY 2008 (requiring the agencies to provide information and assistance upon request) and Section 6(c)(1) of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended.

SIGAR has notified Congress of this matter.

Section One of this report contains an essay on the stifling of one of the most remarkable achievements of reconstruction in Afghanistan: the development of an independent Afghan media. Since August 2021, the Afghan media sector has mostly collapsed under the weight of the Taliban's restrictions and censorship. The essay concludes that, without long-term, institutional support to independent journalists inside and outside of the country, Afghanistan's media may not be able to withstand the Taliban's efforts to totally control the flow of information about the country.

SIGAR issued two performance audit reports and two evaluations this quarter. The first report found that State did not complete required oversight and evaluation of its Antiterrorism Assistance Program in Afghanistan. The second report found that USAID generally met federal and internal requirements for noncompetitive awards, but did not maintain some of the required documents resulting in a lack of complete and accurate records for all award activities.

The first evaluation finalized a review about the validity of allegations that senior Afghan officials stole funds as the government collapsed. Although SIGAR found that some cash was taken from the grounds of the presidential palace and loaded onto helicopters, evidence indicates that the amount did not exceed \$1 million and may have been closer to \$500,000. Most of this money was believed to have come from several Afghan government operating budgets normally managed at the palace.

The second evaluation, undertaken at the request of Congress, assessed the risks to the Afghan people and civil society organizations resulting from the Taliban's takeover. SIGAR found that women and girls now face significant risks

including reduced access to education and healthcare; loss of empowerment, including the ability to be economically and otherwise independent; and heightened personal safety and security risks. The media, healthcare, and education sectors also face acute risk under Taliban rule. SIGAR concluded that current conditions are similar to those under the Taliban in the 1990s.

SIGAR completed six financial audits of U.S.-funded projects to rebuild Afghanistan that identified \$10,668,026 in questioned costs as a result of internal-control deficiencies and noncompliance issues. These financial audits identified a range of deficiencies by U.S. government contractors including Raytheon Company, International Legal Foundation, Albany Associates, Amentum Services Inc., and FHI 360. An additional audit of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University did not find any material weaknesses or internal control deficiencies.

These reviews are required by SIGAR's authorizing statute. Completing them, despite the fall of the internationally supported Afghan government in August 2021, will yield information about the use of funds, agency performance, and reconstruction effectiveness. This information can improve accountability and transparency, suggest process improvements, and generate lessons learned for other current and future overseas reconstruction and development efforts. Moreover, the U.S. government can still recover monies from the questioned costs revealed by these financial audits.

During the reporting period, SIGAR's criminal investigations resulted in two criminal informations, two guilty pleas, five sentencings, and over \$10.3 million in criminal restitutions and forfeitures, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 35.

SIGAR also continued conducting interviews and analysis in support of Congressionally requested assessments including reviewing the factors that led to the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and the Afghan government.

With the support of Congress and the Administration, my colleagues and I at SIGAR will endeavor to keep fighting the waste, fraud, and abuse of U.S. taxpayer funds in Afghanistan.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John F. Sopko

سر مفتش ویژه برای بازسازی افغانستان



اداره
سنتز مفتش اداره
افغانستان د بیار غاونی لپاره د خانگړي

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes SIGAR’s oversight work and updates developments in four major areas of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan from July 1–September 30, 2022.*

During this reporting period, SIGAR issued 11 audits, evaluations, and other products assessing U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Criminal investigations resulted in two criminal informations (a prosecutor’s allegation of a crime, as distinct from a grand-jury indictment), two guilty pleas, five sentencing, and over \$10.3 million in criminal restitutions and forfeitures.

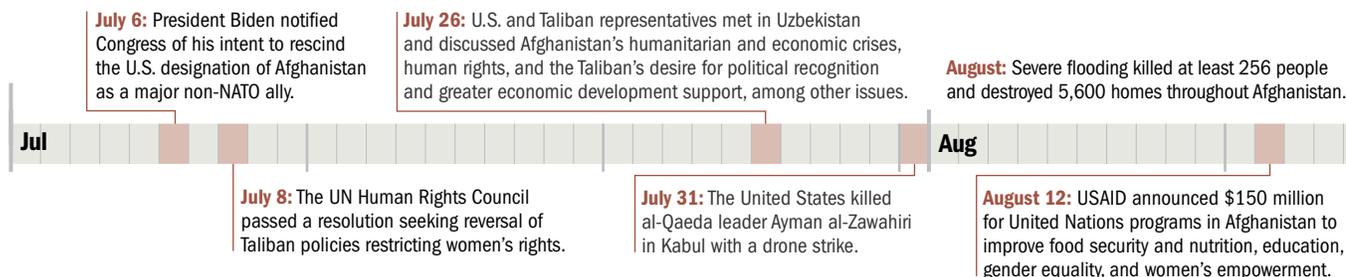
SIGAR OVERVIEW

AUDITS AND INSPECTIONS

This quarter, SIGAR issued two performance audit reports, two evaluations, and six financial audit reports.

- The first **performance audit report** found that the U.S. Department of State did not complete required oversight and evaluation of its Antiterrorism Assistance Program in Afghanistan.
- The second report found that the U.S. Agency for International Development generally met federal and internal requirements for noncompetitive awards, but did not maintain some of the required documents resulting in a lack of complete and accurate records for all award activities.
- The first **evaluation** analyzed the allegations of theft of funds against President Ghani and other Afghan officials during the August 2021 government collapse. SIGAR determined the total funds taken did not exceed \$1 million.
- The second evaluation assessed the risks to Afghan civil society following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. SIGAR found a return to a life similar to that under the Taliban in the 1990s—women and girls face significant risks including reduced access to education and healthcare; loss of empowerment, including the ability to be professionally, socially, and economically independent; and heightened personal safety and security risks. The media and its members also face acute risk of violence and censorship.

KEY EVENTS, JULY–SEPTEMBER 2022



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The six **financial audit reports** identified \$10,668,026 in questioned costs as a result of internal control deficiencies and noncompliance issues.

INVESTIGATIONS

During the reporting period, SIGAR's criminal investigations resulted in two criminal informations, two guilty pleas, five sentencing, and over \$10.3 million in criminal restitutions and forfeitures. SIGAR initiated one case and closed five, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 35.

Investigations highlights include the sentencing of Naim Ismail, an investment bank vice president, to 70 months of incarceration for his participation in various investment schemes that defrauded victims of over \$15 million. Ismail has been ordered to pay a forfeiture of \$10.2 million to his victims. SIGAR and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) jointly conducted the investigation.

A second investigation resulted in a guilty plea by Zachary A. Friedman to charges of tax evasion.

Friedman worked as a senior executive for Red Star/Mina Petroleum, a U.S. Department of Defense fuel supply contractor. From 2013 until 2015, Friedman evaded taxes he owed to the IRS, concealing approximately \$530,000 of income and causing a tax loss to the U.S. government of more than \$207,000. Friedman is the fourth defendant associated with Red Star/Mina Petroleum to plead guilty.

LESSONS LEARNED

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program was created to identify lessons and make recommendations to Congress and executive branch agencies on ways to improve current and future reconstruction efforts. The program has issued 12 lessons learned reports to date.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

SIGAR's Research and Analysis Directorate issued its 57th *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*.

* As provided in its authorizing statute, SIGAR may also report on products and events issued or occurring after September 30, 2022, up to the publication date of this report.

Note: The United States has not yet made a decision whether to recognize the Taliban or any other entity as the government of Afghanistan or as part of such a government. Accordingly, references in this report to a "Taliban-controlled government," "interim government," Taliban "governance," "Taliban regime," a "former Afghan government," or similar phrases are not intended to prejudge or convey any U.S. government view or decision on recognition of the Taliban or any other entity as the government of Afghanistan.

Source: State, response to SIGAR vetting, 7/22/2022.

August 15: The Taliban designated the anniversary of the Islamic Republic's fall a national holiday.

September 19: The United States secured the release of U.S. engineer and Taliban hostage Mark Frerichs.

September 20: Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada appointed Habibullah Agha, a member of his inner circle, as the new minister of education.

Sep

September 14: Treasury and State announced the establishment of an "Afghan Fund" to provide \$3.5 billion in Afghan central bank assets to benefit the people of Afghanistan.

September 27: The Taliban announced a provisional deal with Russia to import one million tons of gasoline, one million tons of diesel, 500,000 tons of liquefied petroleum gas, and two million tons of wheat to Afghanistan annually.



SIGAR has conducted or commissioned audit, inspection, special project, and/or investigation work in 30 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces as of September 30, 2022. (SIGAR image)

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“Attacks against human rights defenders, journalists, and media workers combined with the impact of broader policy measures taken by the de facto authorities have had a chilling effect on freedom of the media and civic activism.”

—*Markus Potzel, UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General*

1 STIFLING OF THE AFGHAN MEDIA



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Cameras cover a Taliban Ministry of Interior event. (Taliban regime photo)

THE STIFLING OF THE AFGHAN MEDIA

In 2018, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John F. Sopko recognized the independent Afghan press as a beacon of democracy, noting the exceptional bravery from a diverse set of journalistic voices in the country.¹ In a region rife with censorship, the growth of Afghanistan's independent press after 2001 was an uncommon feat, with strong legal protections enshrined in the constitution allowing radio and television programming to flourish.² While journalists faced security threats and government corruption, they sought to hold the state more accountable by providing the public a free flow of information for the first time in the country's history.³

The fall of the Islamic Republic to the Taliban in August 2021 has dramatically altered that media landscape. Taliban restrictions, combined with a dire economic crisis, pushed the Afghan media sector to near collapse.⁴ Reporters Without Borders said in August that Afghanistan has lost almost 40% of its media outlets and 60% of its journalists since the Taliban takeover.⁵ Afghanistan's remaining media professionals face a far more constricted environment.⁶ In response, journalists have fled or gone underground. News outlets that continue to operate are controlled tightly and threatened for any disobedience. Despite the new circumstances, Afghan journalists have continued to advocate for their freedom of speech and to persevere in their mission to inform and educate the public. But, without long-term, institutional support to independent journalists inside and outside of the country, it is not clear that Afghanistan's media will be able to withstand the Taliban's efforts to totally control information about Afghanistan.⁷

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEDIA SECTOR

Historically, the Afghan media has developed in fits and starts, thriving during periods of openness, only to be stifled during periods of repression.⁸ The first radio station in Afghanistan, state-owned Radio Kabul, was established in 1925.⁹ The country's 1964 constitution established free speech as a right.¹⁰ In 1978, the state-owned Radio Television Afghanistan was created.¹¹ Then, throughout the 1980s, the pro-Soviet government aimed to limit outside influence by prohibiting the populace from listening

STIFLING OF THE AFGHAN MEDIA

to the British Broadcasting Corporation or Voice of America.¹² In the late 20th century, media advances were further reversed when the Taliban banned all forms of independent media during their rule from 1996 to 2001. At the time, Radio Kabul was converted to the religious station Voice of Sharia.¹³

Following the ousting of the Taliban, Afghanistan looked to the norms established in its 1964 constitution when formulating the new constitution in 2004.¹⁴ The new constitution defined freedom of expression as “inviolable,” whether in speech, writing, illustration, or other means. In addition, the constitution prohibited a priori government approval of printed and published materials.¹⁵ These legal parameters aligned Afghanistan with international norms as delineated in Article 19 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights on freedom of speech and information.¹⁶ Afghanistan’s elected government further codified internationally recognized standards for freedom of speech with the passage of various laws. For example, the 2009 Mass Media law promoted freedom of speech and the rights of journalists.¹⁷

U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan’s media sector grew out of USAID’s policy, in practice since the early 1980s, of seeking to develop independent media overseas as a tool to promote democracy.¹⁸ Early U.S. interventions prior to 2004 aimed to build the media sector in Afghanistan’s previously closed society through support for nascent civil society groups, training programs to teach technical skills, and overseas fellowships for journalists.¹⁹ According to a USAID fact sheet on media in Afghanistan, agency goals included promoting “the free exchange of information and ideas vital to the democratic process and development of civil society,” through “technical support, equipment upgrade, hands-on training in balanced and accurate reporting, and development of an Afghan media and policy regulatory framework.”²⁰ By 2006, USAID had supported 31 community-based, independent radio stations across the country, established radio monitoring and reporting in seven provinces, trained 2,000 media professionals, updated the curriculum at six universities, provided training for 400 novice reporters at university media centers, and distributed 40,000 radios to vulnerable populations.²¹

Subsequent reconstruction efforts focused on building Afghan media through short-and long-term training of local journalists, the privatization of broadcast and print media, direct and indirect assistance to media firms, promotion of media associations, and support for legal and regulatory reforms.²² In total, USAID has spent at least \$220 million on media-and civil-society-focused programs since 2001.²³

LATER STAGES OF MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

As part of USAID's development strategy for Afghanistan, the agency ran the \$9 million Rasana Program from 2017 to 2020.²⁴ Rasana supported independent Afghan media in an effort to provide reliable and balanced information to the public through four primary avenues: supporting and training women journalists; promoting investigative journalism; strengthening advocacy and training to protect journalists; and awarding small grants to expand media outreach to underserved communities.²⁵ In addition, USAID advocated for implementing government commitments to protect journalists.²⁶ Program accomplishments included the training of 1,200 women and girls in critical journalism skills, the production of 2,235 radio packages, and the award of 18 small grants to 14 different media outlets focused on promoting women's voices in the media.²⁷

In 2018, USAID released its 2019–2023 country development cooperation strategy for Afghanistan, outlining a goal to support greater citizen participation in decision-making by increasing Afghans' access to credible public information through the strengthening of relationships between the media and civil society.²⁸ USAID predicted that access to free and fair information, allowing for an informed citizenry, would contribute to a self-reliant Afghanistan.²⁹

The independent media's success in the first decade of the Islamic Republic is illustrated by the impressive growth of the radio industry. Starting with state-owned Radio Kabul in 2001, the industry grew to 174 operating radio stations by 2015.³⁰ Due to extremely low literacy rates in Afghanistan, radio and television programs, including news, cultural, and political programs, became widely popular. The United States and its international partners also used radio and TV to spread messages of political cohesion and progression. According to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), as many as 77% of Afghans relied on the radio as their primary source of information by 2014.³¹ With funding from USAID, USIP developed a radio drama titled "One Village, A Thousand Voices" that showcased young Afghans who were progressive voices in their family and community affairs.³² In 2012, the BBC founded "Open Jirga," a program that brought Afghan citizens together with policymakers to discuss public issues and model government accountability and integrity.³³

International donors provided initial support, but Afghan businesspeople and journalists drove the media's growth. The country's first private radio station was founded in 2003 by the Moby Group with financial support from international donors, including \$2.2 million in seed funding from USAID.³⁴ Within a decade the Moby Group grew to represent 16 businesses across six markets, with a reach of 300 million people.³⁵ Today, Moby Group, led by CEO and founder Saad Mohseni, operates Afghanistan's biggest networks, TOLONews and TOLO TV.³⁶ In an interview with the Committee

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to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Moheseni said of building an independent news outlet: “You have to be focused on reporting facts. It’s totally unvarnished and totally uncensored. And it has to be balanced and non-emotional. News takes a long time, but once you have people’s trust, people stick with you through thick and thin... it’s one of Afghanistan’s great success stories.”³⁷

CHALLENGES UNDER THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

In the words of USAID, the independent media was one of the “most remarkable achievements” of the U.S.-funded reconstruction effort in Afghanistan.³⁸ But despite its successes, the sector has faced various challenges over the past two decades, including factionalism, corruption, terrorist threats, and changing legal protections.³⁹ Following the country’s 2004 elections, there was a rise in “warlord media,” television and radio programs founded by military and political leaders and mujahideen.⁴⁰ Outlets such as Ayna TV, Arzu TV and radio, and Noor TV promoted ethnic and political agendas that some critics saw as divisive.⁴¹

Incidents of violence against journalists spiked in 2014 with 125 cases recorded, including the murder and abuse of journalists investigating corruption in local governance.⁴² The Taliban also issued a fatwa in 2014 against media outlets and promised to destroy the Western-supported independent media.⁴³ USAID acknowledged the significant threats to the media sector in their 2019–2023 Country Cooperation Strategy, including harassment, violence against journalists, and death threats for reporting on sensitive subjects. While most threats were attributed to Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) and the Taliban, USAID also recognized some originating from within the Afghan government.⁴⁴

In 2014, President Ashraf Ghani signed the Access to Information law, wherein Article 15 prohibited content that “endangers independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security, and national interests,” or “violates the privacy of a person.” Media groups argued that the law should be amended to allow for the disclosure of information on corruption, crime, human rights violations, and dangers to public security, if the disclosures were in the public interest.⁴⁵ By 2015, USIP reported that the most serious threat against journalists came from government officials, law enforcement, and local power brokers.⁴⁶ The same year, Afghanistan’s National Security Council and Ministry of Interior issued an official order prohibiting media professionals from questioning officials about security-related issues.⁴⁷ Due to the ongoing climate of insecurity and threats to journalists, by April 2021 Afghanistan was ranked 122nd out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders.⁴⁸

According to Afghan journalist Lotfullah Najafizada, politicians in power were threatened by truthful reporting on their shortcomings.⁴⁹ In an interview with SIGAR, Najafizada described the paradox created by free

STIFLING OF THE AFGHAN MEDIA



Afghan media at the Taliban Ministry of Interior. (Taliban regime photo)

reporting in a developing democracy: while his family members were eager to vote in 2004, for example, by 2019 they had become indifferent to politics because of the widespread coverage of government corruption.⁵⁰

MEDIA UNDER TALIBAN RULE

Following the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, it was not clear whether Afghanistan's independent media would survive under Taliban rule. The group's censorship practices in the 1990s suggested a strong antagonism towards independent reporting.⁵¹ On September 19, 2021, Taliban interim director of the Government and Media Information Center Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi announced in a press conference that 11 new rules would be implemented regarding journalism.⁵² The rules forbid journalists from broadcasting or publishing stories that are "contrary to Islam," "insult national figures," and "violate privacy." Journalists must not "try to distort news content," "respect journalistic principles," and "ensure their reporting is balanced." The regulations further stipulate that, "matters that have not been confirmed by officials at the time of broadcasting or publication should be treated with care," and "matters that could have a negative impact on the public's attitude or affect morale should be handled carefully when being broadcast or published."⁵³ Journalists were ordered to "adhere to the principle of neutrality," "only publish the truth," and follow a specific form of reporting in accordance with Afghan Government Media and Information Center regulations.⁵⁴

Reporters Without Borders immediately raised concerns about the Taliban's failure to adhere to international journalistic standards, the vagueness of the rules regarding what constitutes the truth, and the lack of clarity on what subject matter is contrary to Islam or insults national figures.⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch commented that the Taliban's rules are "so broad and

“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.”

*Reporters Without Borders
Secretary-General
Christophe Deloire*

Source: Reporters Without Borders, “Afghanistan: 11 ‘journalism rules’ imposed by Taliban open way to censorship and arbitrary decisions, RSF warns,” 9/22/2021.

vague as to prohibit virtually any critical reporting about the Taliban.”⁵⁶ After publication of the initial media rules, the Taliban announced additional restrictions. In November 2021, the Taliban issued one mandate banning all foreign productions that they deem contrary to their interpretation of Sharia and another requiring women journalists to wear headscarves on camera.⁵⁷ In May 2022, the Taliban expanded the mandate to require women newscasters to cover their faces while appearing on-air.⁵⁸ Reporters Without Borders Secretary-General Christophe Deloire said of the Taliban’s actions, “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.”⁵⁹

According to Reporters Without Borders, 231 media outlets have closed in Afghanistan since August 2021, and 60% of journalists have lost their jobs (around 6,400 people), including 84% of women journalists.⁶⁰ On the situation, Human Rights Watch Asia Director Patricia Grossman said, “Despite the Taliban’s promises to allow media that ‘respected Islamic values to function,’ the new rules are suffocating media freedom in the country. The Taliban regulations are so sweeping that journalists are self-censoring and fear ending up in prison.”⁶¹

Despite the criticism from human rights groups, the Taliban maintain that there is press freedom in Afghanistan.⁶² Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said at a press conference, “Reporters can write and publish anything that is factual and not a mere accusation. We don’t have any problem with them.”⁶³ The Taliban further assert that privately-owned media companies have not been forced to close and there are no mandates for outright censorship.⁶⁴

Yet a widening gap exists between official Taliban statements on freedom of speech and the experiences of media professionals.⁶⁵ Reports have circulated about Taliban security forces arbitrarily detaining and beating journalists.⁶⁶ Between August and October 2021, 32 journalists were taken into Taliban custody.⁶⁷ Arrests continued with the detention of three journalists in January 2022 for covering protests against the Taliban in Panjshir Province.⁶⁸ The Taliban also detained freelance journalist Murtaza Samadi in Herat on September 6, 2022, for filming a protest.⁶⁹ Samadi was held for three weeks and accused of organizing the protest and having “connections with foreigners.”⁷⁰

In addition to the 11 new media rules, the Taliban now require those working in the media to carry letters of accreditation identifying them as journalists and naming the outlet they work for.⁷¹ One Kabul-based female journalist, who spoke with SIGAR on the condition of anonymity for fear of Taliban reprisal, described how she had been arbitrarily detained by members of the Taliban security forces because they could not read her accreditation letter, which was written in English.⁷² According to this journalist, the Taliban threatened her at gunpoint, destroyed her phone, and

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New UNAMA head Roza Otunbayeva meets with Taliban deputy prime minister Abdul Kabir in Kabul to discuss media rights and other issues. (UNAMA News photo)

held her in detention for four hours.⁷³ CPJ reported in August 2022 that three more journalists had contacted them about being detained, physically abused, and interrogated despite having the required documents.⁷⁴

According to reports, abuses against media members are especially common in the provinces outside Kabul where local Taliban associates have been placed as overseers of departments of information and culture and tasked with regulating local media content.⁷⁵ Journalists speaking to Voice of America on the condition of anonymity recounted new requirements to submit stories to their local media director for pre-approval, a ban on covering protests, and censorship on the question of girls attending secondary school.⁷⁶ Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid denied that journalists require explicit approval to report certain stories; instead he said that some local media directors lack experience and training.⁷⁷

Although the Taliban have attempted to project a more press-friendly image than they were known for in the 1990s, numerous Afghan journalists have left the country after being directly threatened by the group.⁷⁸ Women's right activist and reporter Farida Nekzad described to SIGAR her initial hope during the Islamic Republic-Taliban peace talks that the Taliban had changed their attitude toward the media.⁷⁹ However, Nekzad realized the group had not changed after learning the Taliban had beaten journalists for covering a protest.⁸⁰ Facing threats against her life, Nekzad decided to leave Afghanistan with her daughter. Now a journalist in residence at Carleton University in Canada, Nekzad said her safety is only a temporary personal solution to the ongoing "struggles and dire humanitarian situation" in Afghanistan; she said she feels "helpless knowing there are still girls and

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“What I found was a violent peace. People are arbitrarily detained, disappeared, interrogated, beaten, and killed.”

Reporter Lynne O'Donnell

Source: Lynne O'Donnell, “The Taliban Detained Me for Doing My Job. I Can Never Go Back,” *Foreign Policy*, 7/20/2022.



Lynne O'Donnell conducts an interview in Afghanistan. (Lynne O'Donnell photo)

women suffering [there].”⁸¹ In her view, international community efforts to protect a few independent journalists will not be enough to save the institution of an independent Afghan press.⁸²

Few Afghan journalists have had the opportunity to gain legal residence—and safe harbor—in other countries. Following the collapse of the government, Pakistan issued temporary work visas allowing Afghan journalists to enter the country. These have now expired,⁸³ and, according to reports, approximately 200 Afghan journalists currently in Pakistan are awaiting visa renewals.⁸⁴ SIGAR interviewed one such journalist, Voice of America reporter Kalimullah Hamsukhan, who entered Pakistan on a now-expired tourist visa following the fall of the Islamic Republic. Hamsukhan had been an outspoken critic of the Taliban for many years and feared for his safety in Afghanistan.⁸⁵ Although he considers the government and people of Pakistan welcoming to Afghan refugees, Hamsukhan noted the difficulty many journalists are having with their visas, preventing them from working or finding accommodation.⁸⁶ Despite the myriad challenges journalists face in Pakistan, Hamsukhan described the media environment as an improvement over Afghanistan, where pluralism, democracy, and liberalism have been crushed.⁸⁷ In his view, the Taliban have “changed the philosophy of the [Afghan] media” due to their lack of respect for independent thought and free speech.⁸⁸

In addition to the abuses suffered by Afghan reporters, several foreign journalists have detailed mistreatment at Taliban hands. CPJ reports that Iranian freelance journalist Ibrahim Alipoor was arbitrarily detained in Kabul in November 2021 despite entering the country with the requisite permission letters.⁸⁹ Alipoor was handcuffed and blindfolded for three days and described facing verbal harassment from Taliban members.⁹⁰ Pakistan-based 92News journalist Abdul Qayum Zahid Samadzai was similarly detained for three days in February 2022 and accused of spying for a foreign government.⁹¹ In July, *Foreign Policy* reporter and former Associated Press Kabul bureau chief Lynne O'Donnell was detained, abused, and threatened by Taliban intelligence agents after she entered Afghanistan to report on conditions a year after the collapse of the Republic.⁹² O'Donnell was released only after she agreed to issue a retraction of her previous reporting about Afghanistan via her professional Twitter account.⁹³ Taliban intelligence accused her of spying for a foreign government and refused to tell her which laws she had broken preceding her detention.⁹⁴

Reflecting on her recent experience in Afghanistan, O'Donnell said, “What I found was a violent peace. People are arbitrarily detained, disappeared, interrogated, beaten, and killed. It could be for any reason or no reason they will ever know. The Taliban are pitting neighbor against neighbor, encouraging people to spy on and report each other. Fear is digging in, and it's here for the long haul.”⁹⁵ These sentiments were echoed by fellow *Foreign Policy* journalist Stefanie Glinski in a Twitter thread on October 10, 2022.⁹⁶ After working for four years in Afghanistan, Glinski was

interrogated by the Taliban about the identities of her sources and informed that she would be held legally accountable if she was unable to substantiate reports.⁹⁷ Glinski has left the country and said she will not be returning due to the safety risk.⁹⁸

In August 2022, Taliban authorities detained American journalist and independent filmmaker Ivor Shearer and his Afghan producer Faizullah Faizbakhsh, despite their work permits to film in Afghanistan.⁹⁹ They were questioned by security guards while filming in Kabul and were later handed over to Taliban intelligence.¹⁰⁰ In a statement in late August, CPJ demanded their release, calling the Taliban's actions demonstrative of "an utter lack of commitment to the principle of freedom of press in Afghanistan."¹⁰¹ While senior Biden Administration officials acknowledged the incident during a September 19 press briefing, as this report went to press, they have not publicly commented on the whereabouts and status of Shearer and Faizbakhsh.¹⁰²

RESPONSES TO TALIBAN MEDIA REPRESSION

Afghanistan's media industry has shrunk considerably in the past year.¹⁰³ Journalists fled Afghanistan as the Republic collapsed due to fear of Taliban retaliation, and more still have stopped reporting in fear for their personal safety.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, independent Afghan media has not disappeared, but rather changed form in response to Taliban censorship. In interviews with SIGAR, media professionals described how the independent press has managed to survive, through advocacy and reporting from outside of Afghanistan, or through clandestine operations in Afghanistan.

In March 2022, Voice of America, the U.S. government-funded independent news agency, launched 24/7 direct-to-home satellite television in Dari and Pashto for its audience in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁵ Despite restrictions on foreign-affiliated news outlets, Afghans can access uncensored newscasts including "TV Ashna" and Radio Free Europe programming through Voice of America's satellite channel. According to the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), Voice of America reporters currently work remotely from their homes due to security concerns.¹⁰⁶ Despite this precaution, journalists have been contacted by the Taliban authorities and questioned about their reporting. While USAGM said this has not led to self-censorship, the agency does acknowledge that access to information has become more limited overall due to Taliban restrictions.¹⁰⁷

A hybrid model of press operations is highlighted in the case of Amu TV, a new independent media network founded by Lotfullah Najafizada and Sami Mahdi.¹⁰⁸ Prior to the collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021, Najafizada was working as the director of TOLONews, the largest news operation in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁹ He was considered an industry leader and received widespread recognition for his efforts to promote independent media in

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Markus Potzel, UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, discusses protecting media freedoms with 1TV News in Kabul. (UNAMA News photo)

Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ After the Taliban came to power, Najafizada relocated to Canada for his safety. Between August 2021 and August 2022, he and Mahdi developed and launched an independent Afghan media company run outside Afghanistan, with information sourced from journalists on the ground.¹¹¹ Amu TV was launched with seed funding from international NGOs, operating on a hybrid model where editors and producers work from outside of Afghanistan in order to be free from Taliban pressure.¹¹² Journalists report information from within Afghanistan to their editors outside the country. The news is then shared through a globally available website.¹¹³

Najafizada described his company as an answer to the current media situation, which he sees as highly polarized. On one side, outlets in Afghanistan are under complete Taliban influence. On the other, journalists outside of Afghanistan are reporting very personal and political content against the Taliban. He told SIGAR he hoped to offer a third way—providing nonpartisan information to the public.¹¹⁴ Najafizada acknowledged that this mission is not without hazard, as many reporters still working in Afghanistan have been detained by the Taliban. In conversation he seemed to grapple with the contradictions in his aim to present information to the public without engaging in politics.¹¹⁵ Given Afghanistan's current environment, any independent reporting may be seen by the Taliban and others as inherently political and adversarial.

Other journalists seek to bring awareness of the situation in Afghanistan and Taliban censorship using their media skills. Wahida Faizi, a prize-winning journalist who formerly worked for the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee, fled Afghanistan for her safety in 2021.¹¹⁶ Now settled in Denmark, Faizi aims to create new initiatives that promote Afghan women journalists. In an interview with International Media Support, Faizi said,

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“I am pleased that I can continue my journalism in a new setting as many other fleeing Afghan journalists have not been that fortunate. I feel an obligation to continue this course and to be vocal about the situation of Afghanistan’s journalists.”¹¹⁷

Journalists have also taken to the internet to publish accounts of their experiences before, during, and after the Taliban takeover. Somaia Valizadeh, an award-winning woman journalist from Herat, recently documented her story for London-based policy institute Chatham House.¹¹⁸ Valizadeh said she hid from the Taliban for months before gaining a scholarship for a master’s degree in Istanbul.¹¹⁹ She had originally hoped to continue working as an investigative reporter and journalism teacher, but now wants to educate young girls on human rights and journalism.¹²⁰ In the meantime while in graduate school, Valizadeh will continue to write about Afghanistan. She said, “My future depends on it. I feel it is my primary responsibility to give the Afghan people a voice and share their stories with the world.”¹²¹

CONTRADICTIONS

According to the Taliban’s supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada, “the Islamic Emirate is committed to freedom of expression in accordance with Islamic and Shariah principles and within the framework of the country’s national interests.”¹²² Approximately 40% of news outlets have deemed these restrictions too constraining, or otherwise faced financial crisis or forced closure since the Taliban came to power in August 2021.¹²³ For example, on October 3, Hasth-e Subh Daily [Sam Media] announced on Twitter that the Taliban had suspended their website after reporting on an attack against the Hazara population and on subsequent protests in Kabul.¹²⁴ Others, like TOLONews, have decided to stay and try to operate within the bounds defined by the Taliban. Moby Group CEO Mohseni told CPJ, “We’re scared... we have suffered because of the 70 or 80 people we’ve lost [who have fled],” but TOLO continues to operate now without music shows or soap operas.¹²⁵ According to Mohseni, the station will stay in business in Afghanistan unless women are banned from reporting on air.¹²⁶

The decision to continue media operations is complicated by the economic situation in Afghanistan. While news outlets face new restrictions limiting criticism of the Taliban regime or covering political topics like protests, to close entirely in protest would cost thousands of people their jobs in a time of economic crisis.¹²⁷ The director of the Afghan Independent Journalists Union, Hujatullah Mujadidi, said he felt a sense of responsibility to stay and continue advocating for the jobs of journalists and the longevity of the independent media. In an interview with Voice of America, Mujadidi said, “After the fall of Kabul, press freedom advocates in Afghanistan went quiet... I decided to fill the void.”¹²⁸ Mujadidi contacted

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Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid to express his concerns, and a media advisory committee was formed in response.¹²⁹ Although Mujadidi's power as an independent journalism advocate is limited due to the Taliban's media regulations, he told SIGAR that the committee "addressed the plight of many journalists," and had helped free 13 journalists who were arrested for covering a women's rights protest.¹³⁰ Mujadidi also expressed his confidence that the Taliban have not killed any journalists since taking power, choosing instead to detain them.¹³¹ He contrasted this record with the 110 journalists whom he said were killed in the 20 years of the Islamic Republic.¹³² While records on the exact number of journalists killed during this period in Afghanistan vary, evidence suggests the majority of these homicides were perpetrated by the Taliban and IS-K.¹³³

In interviews, several Afghan journalists brought up the distinction between physical and legal security. While the Taliban boast that no journalists have been killed since August 2021, the journalists SIGAR interviewed commented on the stark difference in journalistic freedom before the Taliban and after. Reporter Kalimullah Hamsukhan described the current situation under the Taliban as one of increased physical security, but profound mental insecurity due to the evaporation of legal protections for free speech.¹³⁴ Although journalists faced threats from terrorist groups, corruption, and an occasionally hostile government under the Islamic Republic, journalists nevertheless believed that as reporters, they had "power."¹³⁵

The media's independence was enshrined in the constitution and this granted journalists the freedom to demand accountability.¹³⁶ As TOLONews and others navigate the new media landscape, they must weigh the costs and benefits of speaking out while acknowledging the relative consequences for their employees and Afghan society.¹³⁷ Under the Taliban, journalists may have an income and the knowledge that no journalists have been murdered in the past year, but they must also work without legal protections, in a climate marked by fear and intimidation.¹³⁸

LOOKING FORWARD

Afghanistan's independent press under the Islamic Republic was both a unique success of U.S.-funded reconstruction and an impressive organic phenomenon that reflected the Afghan people's desire for information.¹³⁹ Although the Ghani and Karzai administrations resisted media criticism, there were few doubts at the time that independent journalism was a new pillar of Afghan society, and a powerful tool in promoting democracy.¹⁴⁰ Today, Afghanistan's independent media is struggling to carry on without the Republic or its legal protections. It remains to be seen whether the international community will continue to support its operations outside or inside the country, on what scale, or whether yet another product of Afghanistan reconstruction will be suffocated by the Taliban.

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“The United States is the world’s leading donor in Afghanistan. This last year alone, we have provided more than \$775 million dollars in humanitarian assistance directly to the Afghan people and Afghans in the region. And we are proud to be the largest funder of UN operations in Afghanistan.”

— *U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield*

Source: United States Mission to the United Nations, “Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on Afghanistan,” 8/29/2022.

Photo on next page

An Afghan man collects food for his family in the Almar District, Faryab Province. (WFP Afghanistan photo)