In Taliban's Media Evolution, Press Became an Enemy

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By Ahmed Rashid.

When I first met the Taliban in 1993 in Kandahar they had no concept of journalism. Their leaders had told them to avoid all foreigners, even non-Taliban Pashtuns who come from the same ethnic group. The Taliban suspected all foreigners and journalists to be spies. Many came from the backward and conservative rural areas of southern Afghanistan that had hardly been touched by the Soviet occupation, making them extremely secretive about their political structures and intentions.

After conquering Kabul in 1996, their leaders went on a blitz, banning all news media except the Taliban-run Radio Afghanistan and hanging television sets from lamp posts to make their point. Television, newspapers, magazines, photography were all forbidden. So for nearly a decade before the September 11 attacks, Afghanistan was without any kind of domestic media.

The Taliban made it extremely difficult for a foreign journalist to carry out normal reporting because they offered no news, facts, or opinions. They failed to understand that ignoring the media only fueled the negative images the world and Afghans had of them. Yet they were never hostile, threatening, or corrupt toward journalists. I was denied a visa by the Taliban in 2000, but the Taliban and I knew the denial had been ordered by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or ISI, which supported the Taliban and was critical of my reporting. When I accidentally met Mullah Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, the Taliban foreign minister, on a flight to Central Asia, he apologized to me and with a wink and nod said that the ban was not his fault. The ISI still tries to be the gatekeeper for anybody trying to contact the Taliban.

By 2000, some Taliban commanders developed a much more hostile attitude toward the media, largely because of the presence of Arab militants and the influence of a very paranoid Al-Qaeda. First welcomed as a guest, Al-Qaeda began to dictate social mores in the major Afghan cities. It encouraged the Taliban to carry out ethnic cleansing against the Shia Hazaras and other minorities like the Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul. Al-Qaeda threatened all foreigners in Kabul, including United Nations and Red Cross officials. The few foreign journalists who did travel to Kabul knew they had to avoid any accidental meeting with the Arabs of Al-Qaeda.

Surprisingly, it was Al-Qaeda and Pakistani extremists who taught the Taliban how to use the media more effectively in the post-9/11 era. After their defeat in Afghanistan in 2001, both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda leadership came to live in exile in Pakistan's northwestern border provinces. Although the Taliban remained extremely secretive about their new political and military structures and their relationships with Al-Qaeda and the ISI, by 2004 they were actively promoting jihad against U.S. occupation forces and what they termed the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai.

The Taliban thus had a public political stance to win sympathizers. On the defensive, fighting a guerrilla war, they also had to create their own publicity if they wanted to show their military successes. Al-Qaeda militants, who by then had set up video film studios in northwest Pakistan churning out gory scenes of suicide bombings and military attacks inside Afghanistan, helped the Taliban do the same.

The Taliban provided video clips of their battles to journalists, sold propaganda DVDs in the markets in Peshawar, and offered instant comment via mobile phone from official spokesmen who were usually based in Pakistan but pretended to be in Afghanistan. They created blogs and websites and eventually Twitter and Facebook accounts. Trained camera operators accompanied particularly audacious attacks against U.S. forces.

The Afghan Taliban's new relationship with Al-Qaeda had enormous moral impact on many Taliban commanders, who became excessively brutal in the belief that they were justly forcing Afghans to embrace their interpretation of Shariah law. One of those commanders, Mullah Dadullah, a close friend of Osama bin Laden, killed a Red Cross engineer in 2003 and had no compunctions about killing journalists. Some of the worst atrocities took place in Helmand Province, Dadullah's area of command. After Dadullah was killed, his brother continued in the same way. In March 2007, the Taliban seized an Italian journalist and his Afghan

interpreter. The Italian, Daniele Mastrogiacomo, was freed in exchange for five Taliban prisoners; the interpreter, Ajmal Naqshbandi, was executed.

Several journalists were to die in suicide bombings, including Abdul Qodus a cameraman for Aryana TV, who was killed in Kandahar in July 2006, and Carsten Thomassen of Norway, who died in the bombing of the Serena Hotel in Kabul in January 2008 carried out by the network of Jalaluddin Haqqani. At the same time, journalists were being picked up for ransom or in bids to get the Americans to release Taliban prisoners. Such tactics became a new form of fundraising and political messaging, all encouraged by the Taliban high command and Al-Qaeda.

The attraction of kidnapping was enhanced by the safe havens afforded by Pakistan's Federal Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA, where hostages could be held indefinitely. Much of this region was controlled by the Haqqani network, which emerged as the leader and adjudicator for both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. Thus, in 2008, David Rohde of The New York Times and Afghan colleague Tahir Ludin were abducted outside Kabul, taken to FATA and kept there while negotiations went on. Rohde and Ludin escaped on foot after seven months of captivity. A year later, Stephen Farrell of the Times and Afghan journalist Sultan Mohammed Munadi, were kidnapped. Farrell escaped in a British-led rescue attempt, but Munadi was killed.

Finally, journalists suffered as casualties of war: blown up by land mines, caught in Taliban ambushes, or the victimized by suicide bombers. By 2007 it had become extremely dangerous if not impossible for Kabul-based media to trust the Taliban for a face-to-face conversation or to go with them on forays into the countryside. Journalists were forced to become Kabul-bound or to leave town only with adequate security.

In Pakistan there was an even more complicated war taking place between the army and the Pakistani Taliban. The Pakistani Taliban were made up of many different factions, the most extreme having been influenced about media and foreigners by Al-Qaeda. Later, extremist groups from Punjab and other parts of Pakistan were to set up bases in FATA, and they were even more hostile to journalists.

The ISI itself played a dubious role. It sided with some Taliban groups, especially those who fought the Americans in Afghanistan, while going after those Taliban who attacked the Pakistan army. Local Pashtun journalists often were caught in the crossfire or found themselves punished either by the Taliban or the ISI because they could not keep up with the constantly changing connections between various Taliban groups and the intelligence service.

War took a toll among local Pakistani Pashtun stringers, who became inadvertent targets of Pakistani airstrikes, Taliban suicide bombings, U.S. drone missile strikes, and other instruments of death. Many Pashtun journalists in FATA, increasingly targeted by all sides, left the region and moved to Peshawar. Many were not regularly paid by the local media and depended on stringing for Western media networks, which invariably asked them to take greater risks. War deaths included Abdul Shaheen, a reporter killed in a Pakistani airstrike while being held prisoner by the Taliban in 2008; Mohammed Sarwar, a driver killed in a suicide bombing in Quetta in 2010; and Abdul Wahab and Pervez Khan, reporters killed in a double suicide bombing that claimed 50 lives in FATA in 2010.

The Taliban publicly gunned down journalists they considered to be traitors or spies—or to have simply covered them insufficiently. The victims included Afghan journalist Janullah Hashimzada, shot by the Pakistani Taliban while riding a public minibus in FATA in 2009. Journalists may well have reported what the Taliban wanted them to report, but there was no guarantee that news desks would use the material, thus creating enormous risks for the stringers.

It soon became apparent that the lower echelons of the ISI who were based in FATA adopted the same attitudes as the Taliban. They expected local Pakistani journalists to be loyal to them, not divulge their secret deals with the multiple Taliban factions, not say who was on their payrolls, and, above all, maintain the myths that drone attacks were carried out by the Americans without ISI intelligence support and that the military was wholeheartedly fighting an all-out war with the Pakistani Taliban. Journalists were arrested or disappeared for months. Some did not return home. In all, 38 journalists were killed in Pakistan in direct relation to their work between January 2005 and October 2012, placing it among the deadliest countries in the world for the press.

Hayatullah Khan, who disclosed that the United States was firing drone missiles into FATA while the military was trying to hide the practice, disappeared in December 2005 and was found dead in June 2006. His body was emaciated, and he had been tortured and shot several times. Doctors said one hand had been manacled in

handcuffs typically used by the ISI. After enormous media and international pressure, a judicial investigation into his death took place, but the results were never made public. In November 2007, his wife was murdered in a bomb attack outside her home, leaving behind five orphaned children.

FATA and the Afghan border region have been off-limits to journalists for several years. There is no independent information from the tribal agencies as political activists, NGO workers, and tens of thousands of people opposed to the Taliban have left FATA and become refugees. The military keeps a tight lid on what is reported from FATA, even if the reports emanate from Peshawar. The Taliban react immediately if anyone tries to report the true facts from anywhere in the northwest.

The lack of information has created a vacuum in which it becomes impossible even for experts to assess the impact of the drone attacks, gauge whether the army or the Taliban control particular regions, measure the strength and ideological basis of the various Taliban factions, and determine the condition of Taliban kidnap victims, both Pakistani and foreign. The Pakistani media, by and large, have gone along with such restrictions so as not to anger either the army or the Taliban. It is one more instance in which the loss of sovereignty over a large area by the Pakistan state and the subsequent widespread suffering of the people is going unreported.

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