# Journalism in Afghanistan:
## Current and post-2014 threats and journalist safety mechanisms
### Assessment

ims

INTERNATIONAL
MEDIA SUPPORT

Source: United Nations Cartographic Section, July 2009

# Contents

# 1. Introduction

The emergence of free media is arguably one of the most significant achievements in the post-Taliban Afghanistan era. Afghanistan has endured three decades of invasions, uprisings and civil war, and yet, in the last ten years, a vibrant and increasingly professional media sector has grown almost from nothing. Today the country has hundreds of publications, dozens of TV and radio stations and several news agencies.

But Afghan journalists have paid a high price for such progress. Journalists have been beheaded by insurgents, murdered in their homes, and killed by bomb blasts. They are routinely beaten, intimidated, threatened and denied information by all sides in the war – insurgents, government officials, local strongmen and foreign forces.

Against this backdrop, and with uncertain times ahead following the pull-out of international troops in 2014, there is a need to address how the work to support free and independent media and create a safer working environment for media workers, so crucial to any democratic process, can be sustained post 2014. In interviews with International Media Support (IMS), a significant number of sources have highlighted that the space for Freedom of Expression is shrinking either through harassment and persecution of journalists or through self-imposed censorship.

This report seeks to provide an immediate overview of the current insecure media environment in which Afghan journalists work and the threat scenario potentially facing them after the 2014 withdrawal of international troops. The aim of the report is to provide input into local and international discussions on what the focus of media development support should be in Afghanistan in future to ensure that Afghan media can play its crucial role in supporting peaceful and democratic development.

The data presented in this report largely stems from on-going monitoring of media workers' safety carried out by the local body Afghan Journalist Safety Committee (AJSC) and its safety coordinators and network of volunteers across Afghanistan. The AJSC implements the IMS-established, country-wide Afghan Journalism Safety Mechanism, a set-up that combines a number of components to enable local media workers to survive and provide the public with accurate, reliable information under the most challenging of circumstances.

Predictions and recommendations made in this report are also based on existing IMS and international partner reports about the situation in Afghanistan, as well as semi-structured interviews carried out in July 2013 face-to-face or by Skype and email with AJSC staff and Afghan media stakeholders in Kabul and the eight provinces of Kandahar, Herat, Khost, Ghazni, Nangahar, Kunduz, Parwan and Balkh. Other interviews were carried out with the Afghan Journalism Union, Afghan civil society and international media development organisations (see Annex 1) about their views on the threats facing media workers. The interviews were carried out by consultants hired by IMS in July 2013. They draw on their own extensive experience of working with the safety of journalists in Afghanistan to arrive at the recommendations presented in this report on how international and local media and media development support actors should move forward.

# 2. General overview of safety in Afghanistan

The following chapter is based on information from security analyses carried out by the authors of this report. According to AJSC records, July has been the worst month in 2013 with the most incidents of threats against journalists reported. UNAMA reports an increase of 23% civilian casualties in July 2013.

Taliban continued its violence-inciting rhetoric with a statement regarding the ongoing bloody incidents in Egypt released on their website condemning the suppression of protests by Egyptian security forces and encouraging fighters to continue with jihad against the enemies.

Assassinations, abductions and intimidation of the local population continue and high-profile events and celebrations often attract an increased amount of threats by insurgent cells (INS) planning to carry out attacks, or at least circulating rumours of planned attacks in an attempt to gain media attention. In some instances there were rumours of planned attacks on international media in particular and on some of the local media outlets like 1TV, Tolo TV/ Moby Group and the BBC. To identify exploitable weaknesses in the security situation within the Kabul area, it is likely that insurgents remain involved in a continuous process of reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, particularly against ANSF and GIRoA personnel, though ISAF and the wider international community are also likely to be monitored.

International development agencies have begun to reduce countrywide operations and there is an increased threat of suicide attacks against the UN and other international bodies during the election period and in a post 2014 scenario.

Kabul continues to be one of the primary targets of high-profile attacks by many of the insurgent groups (INS) operating in Afghanistan. Suicide attacks and complex attacks remain the preferred choice for insurgent cells operating in the area. GIRoA/ANSF sites and some of the more popular hotels and guesthouses in Kabul are regularly reported as potential targets for high-profile attacks. As a consequence, it remains prudent for international agencies operating in the Kabul-area to maintain a high degree of security vigilance.

Taliban cells have been known to carry out attacks against the security forces at airports, albeit on an infrequent basis and the attacks have typically involved the use of unguided rockets. The attacks are seldom effective due to the inherent inaccuracy of the munitions used and the poor level of training of the INS fighters.

Alarmingly, the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) has reported that Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan is planning to start to use insurgents, who pretend to be reporters and are equipped with cameras and false IDs. Terrorist activities might be conducted targeting Afghan officials, the international community, cultural institutes and media houses. The Afghan media is alarmed by this move, which may lead to the restricted access of media workers to many government institutions.

## 2.1 Safety situation in relation to upcoming elections in 2014

CTD have reported that the Sarajudin Haqqani Network is planning to carry out an increased amount of terrorist attacks targeting the Afghan government units and Kabul International Airport, as well as parts of the international community in future. Security therefore will be the main challenge during the upcoming 2014 presidential elections. The opening of voter registration centers in July 2013 has been delayed in 12 districts due to insecurity. Also, citizens in 13 provinces are worried that weather

conditions could also prevent people from casting their votes with roads being inaccessible due to snow. Difficult weather conditions and lack of security may result in 30 % of Afghans having no access to polling centers. Whether the elections will be postponed from the present date set, April 2014, to later in the year remains to be seen.

On the political front, political parties are forming alliances ahead of the 2014 elections and are hiring non-qualified bodyguards to protect the politicians. This could mean increased risks for civilians, if security around the elections is not in professional hands.

# 3. Provincial safety challenges facing media workers

Safety is an increasing concern for journalists in Afghanistan in the wake of frequent attacks on journalists by the likes of Taliban, warlords, organized criminals, and the Afghan government and security apparatus. The attacks and threats facing journalists and media workers across Afghanistan vary in nature according to geographic location and political and social context.

The following chapter provides an overview of attacks on media by province/zone between 1 January – 30 June 2013[1] based on AJSC's provincial safety coordinators' monthly monitoring reports. The chapter also includes an analysis of how security challenges and cases of violence affect the media as a whole.
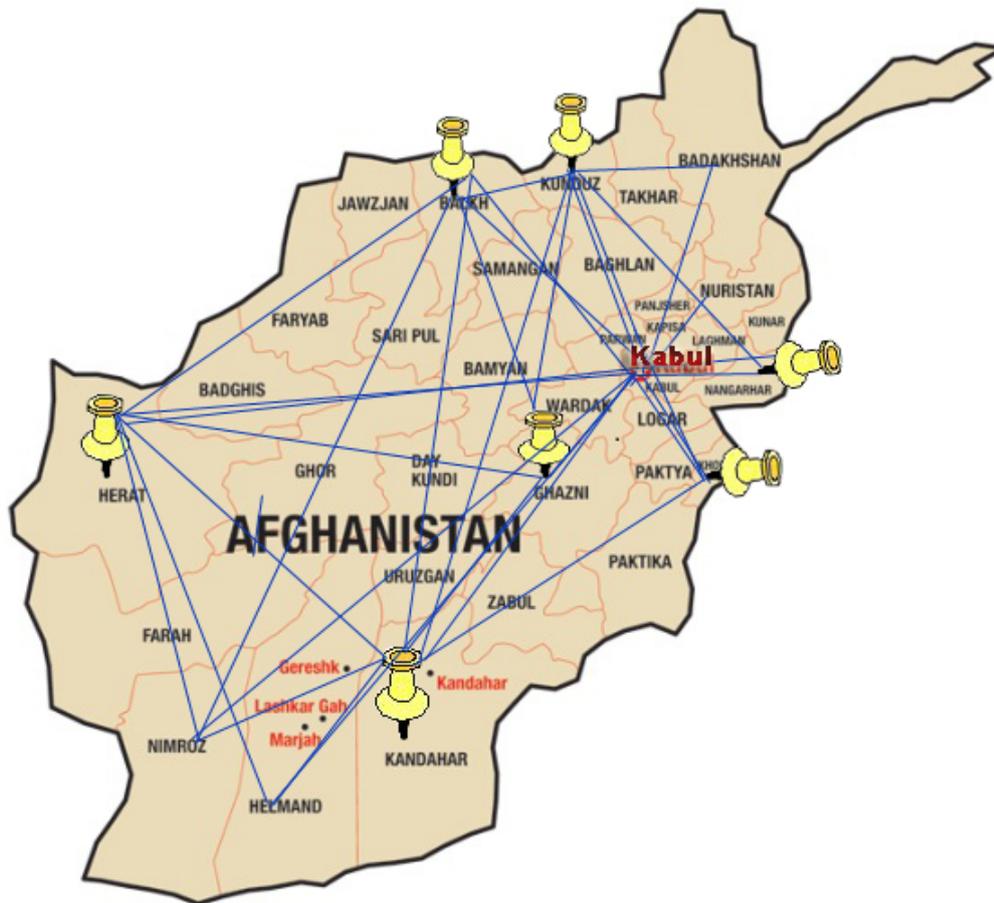


Figure A: Representation of the AJSC in Afghanistan.

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[1] Source: AJSC six month monitoring report on attacks against media workers in Afghanistan between 1 January – 30 June 2013.

## 3.1 Attacks on media in north-eastern provinces

The onset of spring 2013 was accompanied by an increase in the level of insurgents' violence throughout the four provinces in the north-east part of the country which resulted in an increasingly restrictive working environment for media workers. In the case of Badakhshan an unprecedented massive armed conflict took place and lasted for three months almost locked down the media completely. In 2013 there has also been increase in the levels of violence in two other provinces in the north-eastern part of the country such as Kunduz and Baghlan, although, despite the increase, these provinces are still more peaceful than they were a number of years back. The following table gives details of attacks on journalists in this zone:

*Table 1: Attacks in Badakhshan, Kunduz and Baghlan provinces (source: AJSC)*

| No | Name | Organization | Province | Nature of the Incident | Source of Violence |
|----|------|--------------|----------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Abdul Malik Khurasani | Radio Kokcha | Badakhsan | Injured | Security workers/police |
| 2 | Naseer Ahmad Sadeq | 1 TV | Takhar | Physical assault | Police |
| 3 | Shahbaz Saberi | Khawar TV | Kunduz | Physical assault | police |
| 4 | Basher Ahmad Ghezali | Radio Freedom | Baghlan | Telephone threat | Kidnappers |
| 5 | Sher Mohammad Jahesh | VOA Radio | Baghlan | Telephone threat | Land grabbers |
| 6 | Ahmad Wali Sherzad | PRT media | Kunduz | Telephone threat | Taliban |
| 7 | Abdul Woodod Wahedi | Radio Bayan | Baghlan | Telephone threat | Kidnappers |
| 8 | Dayan Ahmadi | Radio Freedom | Badakhshan | Telephone threat | Unknown people |
| 9 | Hayatullah Hayat | Noor TV | Kunduz | Telephone threat | Taliban |
| 10 | Mozamel | Radio Enekaas | Kunduz | Murder | Not known |
| 11 | Najia Khudayar | Radio Zohra | Kunduz | Telephone threat | Taliban |

The IMS Safety Coordinator from Kunduz reports of a decrease in government cooperation with journalists, particularly when it comes to providing information regarding violence and other security matters.

The incidences of violence and intimidation have increased in Kunduz compared to the past year and most of them are in the form of telephone threats, physical assault and lack of provision of information to journalists by government officials. Based on provincial reports from safety

coordinators, one journalist was killed in Kunduz province and one was injured in Badakhshan province between March-August 2013. In the same period of time, AJSC's regional zone representative received 15 very serious cases that led the involved journalists to consider leaving their profession.

Media workers in Baghlan province face challenges apparently caused by their lack of professional capacity. Unprofessional journalists create unprofessional reports, and put themselves at risk.

Officials of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) beat up a cameraman in Baghlan in July after which media workers in Baghlan boycotted cooperation with the Governor's office. Though the Head of Baghlan, NDS offered a personal apology to the cameraman although they simultaneously pointed to the unprofessional behaviour of journalists. On 23 July 2013, armed men connected to the former Mayor of Baghlan Sayed Maqsood Saadat, attacked another journalist, Hameed Sherzai. Journalists from Baghlan are requesting more training and roundtables to address the role and safety of the media in their province.

## 3.2 Attacks on media in western provinces

The Western zone of Afghanistan is witnessing increased self-censorship by journalists in the face of increasing insecurity, decreasing cooperation of government officials in providing information and decreasing access to remote areas due to attacks and roadside bombs. When threats to one's safety become so imminent that safety becomes a priority, journalists are compelled to adopt self-censorship as a self-protection policy. Safety coordinators from the western zone report of increasing rates of violence in the provinces of Farah, Ghor and Badghis. A recent example of this was the attack on the Provincial Court building in Farah Province.

The Taliban is still considered a significant country-wide threat to Afghan journalists and have been the main sources behind attacks on media in the western provinces. The Taliban understands the power of press they have a proactive media strategy and understand the implications of negative reporting about them, but they show no commitment to the values of free media and Freedom of Expression.

*Table 2: Cases of threats and attacks against media workers in the western provinces of Farah, Herat and Ghor (source: AJSC)*

| No | Name | Organization | Province | Nature of Violation | Source of Violence |
|----|------|--------------|----------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | 12 Media Workers of Tolo TV | Tolo TV | Farah | Armed attack by Taliban | Armed Taliban |
| 2 | Ibrahim Mohammadi | Radio Faryad | Farah | | Armed Taliban |
| 3 | Nazir Reha | Managing Director of Asia TV | Herat | | Unknown |
| 4 | Ibrahim Mohammadi | Radio Faryad | Farah | | Armed Taliban |
| 5 | Ahmad Nadeem Ghori | Chief Editor of Sam Daily | Ghor | | Armed Unknown |
| 6 | Aziz Ahmad Sadiqi and Said Sharif Aseel | Chief Editor and Journalist of Taban TV | Herat | | ANP Officer |

| 7 | Ali Asghar Yaqoobi | Journalists and Head of Directorate of Information and Culture | Herat | | Armed Taliban |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

The threats often take the shape of organised kidnapping which is planned and conducted by criminal groups, drug dealers or people acting out of desperation due to their life situation. The reasons behind receiving threats can be manifold, related to ethnic background, writing a critical story, having expensive equipment which is often viewed as suspicious in that one group believes that the journalist has been bought off" by another adversary group.

The connections between political power brokers, elders and criminal gangs cannot be underestimated. There is widespread evidence of connections between criminal gangs, warlords and government entities.

## 3.3 Attacks on media workers in northern provinces

In the five northern provinces of Balkh, Jawzjan, Sar-e-Pul, Faryab and Samangan seven cases of violence, harassment, threats and death of media workers were noted in the reporting period. Female media workers have faced serious cases of harassment, leading to their resignation and in some cases, firing. Two journalists were fatally targeted in the other northern provinces of Parwan and Kapisa, leading to increased self-censorship on the part of other journalists.

The Haqqani Network, one of the strongest insurgent organisations, has also been involved in attacks and is known to dislike Afghan journalists. The reasons are said to be connected to the nature of reports compiled by Afghan media workers.

## 3.4 Attacks on media workers in eastern provinces

The AJSC safety coordinators' reports from the eastern provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika are on the radar of the Haqqani Network, which has close ties to Pakistani intelligence agencies, and run numerous training camps for the Taliban and other extremist forces in the border region. These camps provide a safe haven for foreign fighters, further aggravating the security situation. The real impact of the presence of foreign fighters will become visible after the 2014 departure of foreign troops from the country.

Media workers are currently facing the challenge of decreased access to information, government pressure leading to closure of a couple of radio channels, threats from criminals and the Taliban and face surveillance on reporting missions. The media workers are concerned about how to keep the media running in these provinces and therefore have called a media shura to discuss the future of the media.

In the eastern provinces of Logar, Ghazni, and Bamian, the main perpetrators behind threats against journalists specifically in the Ghazni province have been the government and the Taliban. Two journalists reporting on a bomb explosion in a civilian vehicle were captured, tortured and later released by the Taliban in the Said Abad District of Maidan Wardak. Government forces have also targeted media workers through physical violence.

*Table 3: Attacks on media workers in Logar, Ghazni and Bamian (source: AJSC)*

| No | Name | Organization | Province | Nature of the Incident | Source of Violence |
|----|------|--------------|----------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Khan Wali Ahmadzai | Sallam Watandar | Logar | Kidnapping | Armed Gang |
| 2 | Rahmatullah Naikzad | AlJazeera TV | Ghazni | Capture and Physical Violence | Armed Taliban |
| 3 | Abdullah Rahmani | AlJazeera English | Ghazni | Capture and Physical Violence | Armed Taliban |
| 4 | Zafar Bamiani | VoA | Bamian | Telephonic Threat | Jehadi Commander and Afghan Local Police Commander |

Government law enforcing agencies, their international allies, sub national authorities, politicians and high-ranking members of the government and warlords continue to pose serious threats to media workers all around the country, especially in Nangahar. The media workers expressed their concerns in a protest in front of the Nangarhar Provincial Governor's office on 19 May 2013. The reputation of Nangarhar's provincial governor as a corrupt senior official and his lack of attention to people's demands has empowered criminal gangs in his area. Nangahar's proximity with Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and its inability to control Afghanistan's border with Pakistan further aggravates the situation.

*Table 4: Attacks on media workers in Nangarhar province (source: AJSC)*

| No | Name | Location | Province | Nature of the Incident | Source of Violence |
|----|------|----------|----------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Babrak amirzada | Jalalabad | Nangarhar | Physical assault | National Directorate of Security |
| 2 | Ziar Khan Yad | Jalalabad | Nangarhar | Physical assault and harassment | National Directorate of Security |
| 3 | Noorullah | Jalalabad | Nangarhar | Physical assault and harassment | National Directorate of Security |
| 4 | Shafiqullah Khewawall | Jalalabad | Nangarhar | Kidnapping | Unknown |

## 3.5 Attacks on media workers in southern provinces

Provincial reports speak of a worsening security situation in Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan related to the fact that the Afghan National Army (ANA) has taken over security in these provinces and that foreign troops are withdrawing. This region is witnessing many attacks aimed at the government and international security forces in the cities as well as in the main districts with the usual influx of fighters from Pakistan. Most of the attacks are in the form of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

In Zabul Province, the main source of threat against journalists has been the government and the Taliban. In February, two journalists by the name of, Haroon Kiliwal and Timor Sha Shahzad from the provincial state-run radio were briefly jailed and subsequently fired from their jobs after reporting from a meeting at which participants criticised the government.

Table 5: Attacks on media workers in Zabul province (source: AJSC)

| No | Name | Organization | Province | Nature of the Incident | Source of Violence |
|----|------|--------------|----------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Haroon Kiliwal | Qalat Voice Radio | Zabul | Detention & expulsion from job | Government |
| 2 | Timor Sha Shahzad | Qalat Voice Radio Station | Zabul | Detention and firing from job | Government |
| 3 | Ahmad Zia Abid | Shamshad TV | Zabul | Injured in suicide attack | Armed Taliban |
| 4 | Allah Mohammad Khoshal | Shamshad TV | Zabul | Injured in suicide attack | Armed Taliban |

## 3.6 Overview of numbers of reported cases by province

The below graph (Figure B) shows the number of cases of attacks on journalists reported in the period from 2001-June 2013 by province. Kabul by far has the highest number of reported cases, according to the AJSC, followed by the southern provinces of Herat, Kandahar and Nangahar.

Contrary to the popular perception of security in the capital, Kabul is currently the most dangerous place for journalists judging by the number of recorded incidents of threats and violence against media workers. This may be driven by a number of factors such as the concentration of majority of news agencies and journalists, as well as the headquarters of government institutions, international organisations and civil society. Herat is on the tail of Kabul in terms of reported incidents against media workers. However, the geographical location of Herat near Iran may also play a role.

*Figure B: Number of threats according to geographical location/province (2001-June 2013)*
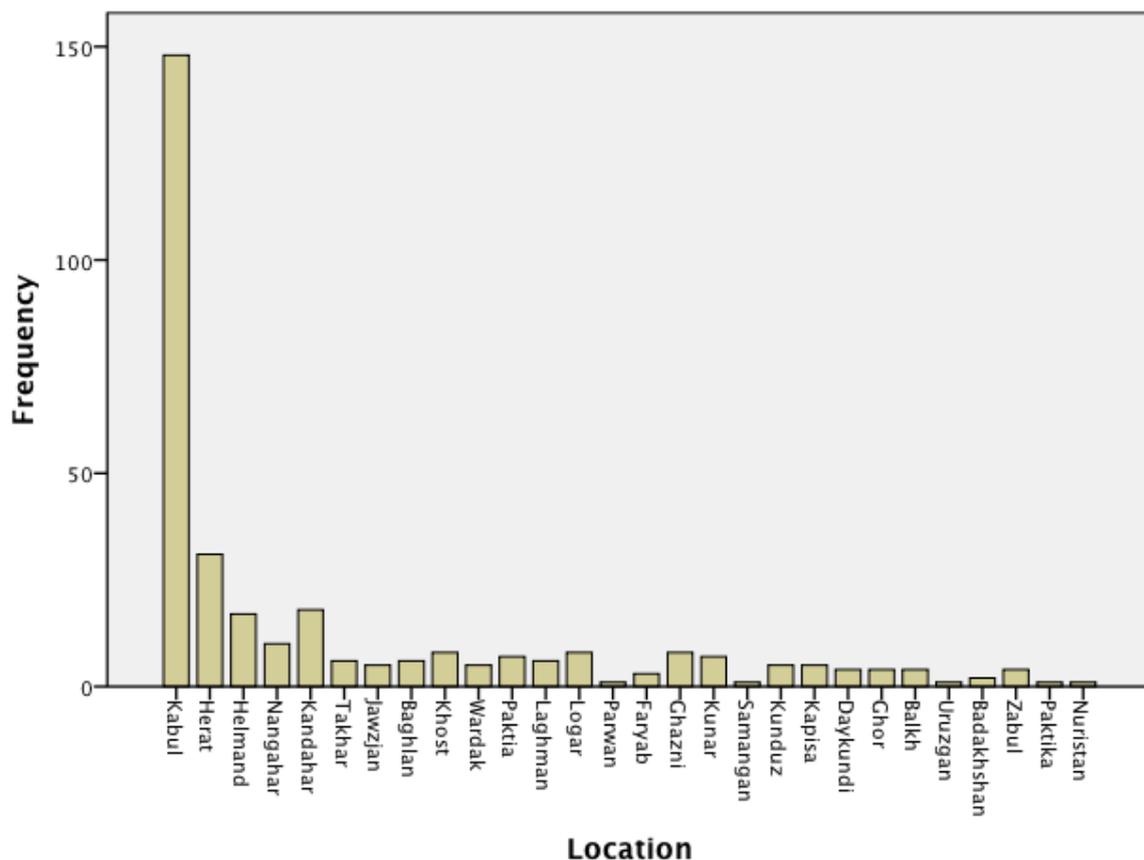


Source: AJSC

## 3.7 Nature of incidents committed according to gender

The below chart shows the types of attacks and the ratio committed against male and female journalists in Afghanistan from 2001-2013 (investigated cases). Although the majority of attacks are committed against male journalists simply due to the fact that there are more male than female journalists, female journalists are increasingly the targets of attacks as they symbolise a threat to Afghan society's traditional gender roles, politically corrupt elements as well as religious fanatics.

*Figure C. Nature of incidents by gender committed against media workers in Afghanistan*
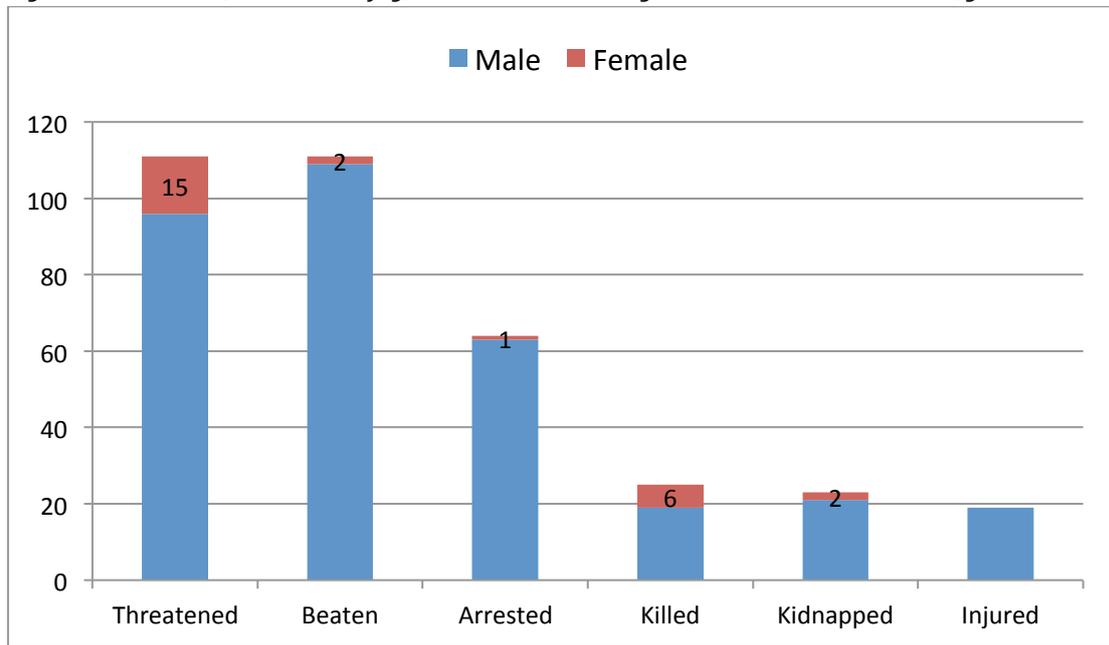


Source: AJSC

## 3.8 Number of threats/attacks received by different media

*Figure D: Number of threats/attacks received by different media (source: AJSC)*
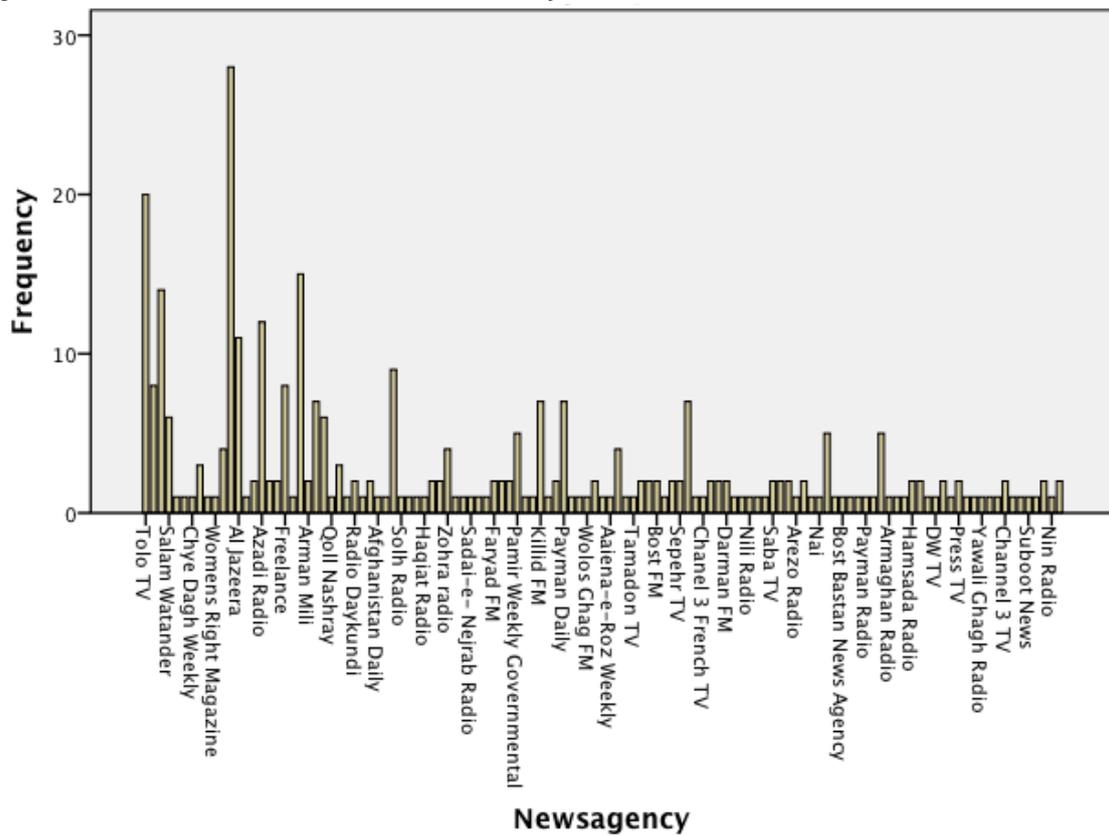
## 3.9 Roles within media most prone to threats

Within the media outlets the role that attracts the most threats is the reporter, who is exposed to threats when collecting data.  Reporters of electronic media such as TV channels face the most threats due to their visibility and the equipment they carry and the fact that they often remain at the scene of an incident longer than others to shoot visual material.

*Figure E: The roles within media most prone to threats (source: AJSC)*
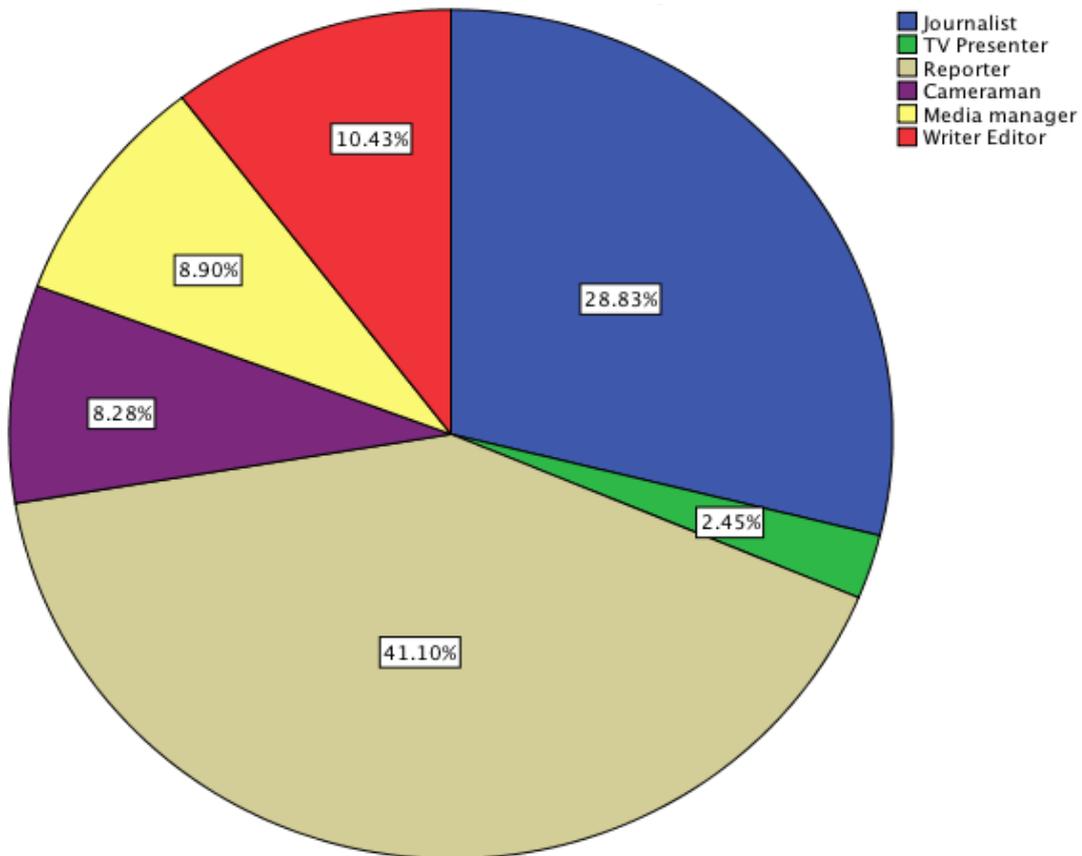
# 4. Findings and analysis of the media scene

Afghan media organisations and workers operate in challenging situations. They face threats in particular when the content of their journalistic reports exposes or investigates sensitive issues close to those seeking or in power. The growth of the Afghan media since 2001 has been the highlight of a decade of development, but the legacy of the past ten years continues to lack institutionalised Freedom of Expression. The violation of media workers' rights remains rampant.

Despite the past ten years of unprecedented media growth in Afghanistan, Afghan media has yet to become a seasoned industry. Lack of journalistic professionalism, biased reporting and self- censorship coupled with a lack of training, the personal agendas of media workers and intimidation, are widespread and can be seen as the main challenges of Afghan media.

A more in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the Afghan media and the context in which media workers work would strengthen the programmatic focus of international organisations in their media support programmes. Media workers are also considered human rights defenders in Afghanistan, which makes them a vulnerable group.

This chapter sums up the main concerns facing Afghan media at present and post-2014 according to feedback from interviews carried out with the AJSC safety coordinators and a number of other local and international media stakeholders in Afghanistan.

## 4.1 Challenges facing media in Afghanistan

According to the feedback from sources interviewed by the authors of this report, the withdrawal of international forces in 2014 will not only have financial, but also safety implications for the media and society as a whole. The reduction in international security forces will put the lives of media personnel in danger, in particular those associated with international media organisations and other international NGOs.

### 4.1.2 Financial dependence of media

One widely observable characteristic of the Afghan media and media workers is their institutional and individual dependence on the international community, leading to a negative transformation of media giants into profit driven businesses. The inability and lack of willingness to revisit the purpose of the media outlet becomes deadly for the business. Transforming this relationship of dependence into independence will not be easy, but is much needed if the Afghan media wants to continue to receive international support and maintain its partnerships at the international level.

### 4.1.3 The Afghan media law

The role of the Afghan media law is limited by virtue of the government's inability to enforce it, as much as it provides some level of deterrence and increased capacity of the Afghan media to anchor their safety in it.

The absence of a coherent media policy or legal framework remains a major impediment to the proper functioning of media. People's lack of trust in the Afghan government, driven by its failure to meet

people's expectations and deliver basic services such as security has led to serious questions raised around the government's agenda-driven treatment of the Afghan media law.

## 4.1.4 Female media workers targeted

Although female media workers represent a minority in the journalist profession they are frequent targets of attacks as they symbolise a threat to traditional, cultural gender roles, politically corrupt elements and religious fanatics. Fewer reports of attacks against women journalists are officially reported and cultural and social stigmas associated with their affiliation with this profession, or in fact any profession, hampers their ability to work freely. These concerns remain strong as the 2014 withdrawal nears. Women's organisations are highlighting the issue, but the government is not responding supportively.

Despite women-sensitive programming, and evident attempts by the international community and local stakeholders to address the vulnerabilities of women in journalist professions, there is a lack of sufficient information regarding female media workers. The number of women working in this field has increased compared to the era prior to 2001, but has drastically decreased again since The numbers of male journalists is higher for cultural reasons and thus the rate at which men facing danger is quantitatively higher as well.

For cultural reasons women are stigmatised for leaving the home and taking on the journalism trade. This complicates their access to information and reduces their chance of competing on par with their male counterparts. Adding to this are the limitations presented by widespread sexual harassment at the workplace, a characteristic of most public and private institutions. Reports from the northern zone of Afghanistan speak of female media workers facing serious cases of harassment leading to their resignation and in some cases firing.

## 4.1.5 Personal and institutional partisanship within media

Partisanship, a politicised media agenda and corruption have greatly affected the capacity of media organisations to be neutral and true to their sense of purpose.

Other countries in the region play a critical role in influencing this, which given the increased political tensions between Afghanistan and its neighbours, must be addressed at many levels. Training on professional, non-partial and conflict sensitive journalism as tool is essential in this matter.

## 4.1.6 Self-censorship – an evil cycle

The deteriorating safety situation leads to increased self-censorship. Media workers are practicing self-censorship to keep themselves alive. This is a conflicting dynamic amongst the media workers, which can only be managed by supporting Freedom of Expression in the country and strengthening the role of the media in conflict.

The government and other perpetrators of violations of rights of journalists play a key role in promoting self-censorship which in turn contributes to increased pressure, an evil cycle. The useful and practical implementation of the media law may help to enhance confidence in the environment within which journalists operate. It is however the job of the government to provide, protect and strengthen such an environment and the implementation of the law is critical to this achievement.

Provincial safety coordinator reports from the western provinces confirm increased rates of self-censorship by journalists due to increased insecurity, lack of access to information, despite the telephone being a helpful tool for data collection.

## 4.1.7 Weak environmental, institutional and individual capacity

Weak capacity of media at the individual, institutional and environmental levels is a common finding in Afghan media. This is a condition, which can be altered through persistent learning opportunities for Afghan media workers.

## 4.1.8 Perpetrators of threats

According to the cases recorded, reports received from provincial safety coordinators as well as information gained from interviews conducted for the purposes of this report, the Afghan government emerges as the greatest threat to the Afghan media in the last decade - even surpassing that of the Taliban.

The more media outlets criticise the government, the more threats they receive, according to those interviews. The rising insecurity has encouraged wider media criticism of the weak capacity of the government to keep society safe. The government's own attacks on media as well as especially the National Directorate of Security's attempts to use media to drive their agenda in the name of national interests, have translated into a pattern that has encouraged warlords, criminals and other protagonists to target media without fear of state-enforced punishment. . Given this situation, journalists are forced to constantly consider what content may expose them or their family to threats. This pre-planning of content takes the form of self-censorship.

Often, concepts vaguely defined such as national interest or national security is used to rationalise restrictions on media organisations and the limitations imposed on Freedom of Expression. This gives rise to another challenge, questioning the constitutionally protected right to access to information, given that concepts like "in the interest of national security" are often used to block access to information on programmes and policies in public governance institutions. The Afghan government for one has responded to this shift; people requesting more access to information, with increased restrictions, despite the anti-constitutional nature of those restrictions.

The Afghan National Police, the Afghan National Army as well as warlords also continue to be amongst the main sources of threats. In Ghazni province for example, media are increasingly pressured by anti-government forces, resulting in limited or no opportunity for use of media by the government. The table below shows the main perpetrators of threats.

*Table 6: Main perpetrators of threats/attacks*

| Protagonist | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unknown | 55 | 16.9 | 16.9 | 16.9 |
| Government | 86 | 26.4 | 26.4 | 43.3 |
| Afghan police | 58 | 17.8 | 17.8 | 61.0 |
| Coalition forces | 14 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 65.3 |
| Taliban | 50 | 15.3 | 15.3 | 80.7 |
| NDS | 13 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 84.7 |
| Civilian | 26 | 8.0 | 8.0 | 92.6 |

| Security Guard | 19 | 5.8 | 5.8 | 98.5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ANA | 2 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 99.1 |
| Warlord | 3 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 326 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: AJSC 2013

# 5. The IMS-founded safety mechanism for journalists in Afghanistan

IMS has been conducting journalism safety related activities in Afghanistan since 2008. IMS' work on media safety goes beyond simply ensuring physical safety. IMS' holistic approach to media safety combines training, practical measures and advocacy.

| Training | Practical measures | Advocacy |
|---|---|---|
| Journalism ethics | 24/7 telephone hotlines for journalists | Monitoring attacks on media |
| Local and international media laws and code of conduct | Safe houses | Dialogue between military, police and media |
| Conflict sensitive journalism Photo journalism (empowering photography) | Safety fund for emergency assistance to journalists and their families | Media law reform and access to information law process |
| Learning to make a risk management plans of the media working environment and basic first aid skills | Safety equipment | Campaigns promoting journalists' safety |
| Social media (e.g. the use of security alerts via SMS) and digital journalism | Legal advice | Coordinated international support to safety and protection measures |
|  |  | International Partnerships |
|  |  | Guides and handbooks |

Media workers need to be able to assess and mitigate the risks they face, to deal with the psychological consequences of working in conflict and to practice professional journalism. With this aim, IMS established a locally led, countrywide, multi-layered safety and protection mechanism. The comprehensive journalist safety mechanism includes the following components:

## 5.1 The Afghan Journalist Safety Committee (AJSC)

The AJSC runs the Afghanistan journalist safety mechanism together with IMS. The body has its headquarters in Kabul with six staff members and nine regional safety coordinators based in different provinces who monitor the safety situation of journalists in their area. With its coordinators and the help of 26 volunteers, the AJSC covers 32 out of 34 Afghan provinces.

The AJSC is the first organisation of its kind in Afghanistan with its inclusion of press unions, media representatives and civil society organisations.

The initiative began in 2009 after the establishment of a working group by IMS comprising independent Afghan journalists and media activists. This working group drafted rules of procedure for the current establishment in place.

The AJSC has helped facilitate a continuous and stable dialogue with the Afghan government on media safety.

Despite geographic limitations, the committee has also garnered strong support from the Afghan media community. The committee offers a useful platform for responding to safety needs of media workers in Afghanistan. Managed by IMS' Safety Coordinator, supported by IMS' safety advisor for Afghanistan, this system is based on regular contact with national and international stakeholders in the country.

The sub-components of the AJSC and other components of the safety mechanism are:

## 5.2 Regional safety team

The provinces of Kandahar, Herat, Khost, Ghazni, Balkh, Kunduz, Parwan and Nangarhar serve as basis for regional safety coordinators. The remaining 26 provinces have volunteer focal points, a recent initiative of IMS that underlines the impact of the work of IMS in this area over the last couple of years, and supports the assumption of increased willingness and readiness for programmatic and operational expansion of the work of the AJSC.

The role of the regional safety coordinators is to liaise with the threatened journalists, necessitating close coordination and cooperation vertically with the Kabul HQ safety coordinator, and horizontally with other relevant stakeholders such as media outlets, local police, UNAMA, NATO PRTs, civil society organisations, and human rights agencies, through and on the basis of regular reporting on cases of threats against media workers, context and stakeholder analysis, and monitoring of the evolving political situation and security assessments.

Additionally, the provincial coordinators maintain an updated database of relevant stakeholders at national, sub-national and international levels for ease of access and smooth communication.

## 5.3 Reporting mechanism

Provincial safety coordinators are required to provide immediate updates on instances of violation of journalists' rights, in addition to regular bi-monthly reports to Kabul HQ, which in return provides bi-annual reports to the IMS. Immediate updates serve the purpose of alerting the national and international media community on cases of violation, as well as underlining the presence of watchdog entities recording the number and nature of violations.

In addition, these alerts keep the media community informed, thus contributing to the strength of the network and support systems and helps remain mindful of potential threats.

## 5.4 Media safe houses

Initiated during the development of the UNAMA Kabul Declaration in early 2009, the safe houses contribute to the protection measures offered to journalists threatened with potential violence for the duration and persistence of the threat.

Safe houses are open 24/7 to assist media workers in emergency situations. The vulnerability associated with the safe house is its lack of protection from the Afghan National Police, underneath which is a lack of trust of the government, given the high probability of involvement of the government as the source of the threat. Yet at a very practical level, the safe houses have saved lives

in a cost-effective way, saving the hassle of international travel when the luxury of time is unavailable, allowing the media workers to remain in contact with the media community, remain useful and better enabled the families of threatened journalists to cope with the situation.

## 5.5 Mobile phone hotline

This is a crisis management measure, facilitating media workers' access to a 24-hour mobile phone hotline, for questions ranging from emergency counselling to requests for protection and legal services. The hotline has helped journalists connect with the AJSC, serving all purposes of alerting the media community, offering protection to the media worker and recording the violation. The safety committee has widely informed media outlets and workers across the country of the existence of the hotline. IMS's HQ/ Afghanistan focal point is the back-up for all operations.

## 5.6 Training

Driven by a holistic approach and with the aim of enhancing the safety of media workers, the safety package includes the following components: safety/risk management and first aid training, journalistic ethics, conflict sensitive journalism, photojournalism, social media training and ICT security trainings which have been delivered since early 2008. Safety trainings help address instances of violence when they are predicted or have happened already.

*Conflict Sensitive Journalism* training provides media workers with a method of writing that avoids terms that incite further conflict. Photojournalism (empowering photography method) was added to the broader training of the safety package in 2010 to improve the skills of the filmmakers and photographers to tell more conflict sensitive stories to the broader (often illiterate) public through pictures and also empower the Afghans to tell other narratives of the conflict.

## 5.7 Case-based safety advice

The distinction between case-based safety advice and the rest of the safety measures is rooted in the nature of the threat and the urgency of the situation in which a media worker operates. In most cases, safety advice is given in cases that have not yet reached the crisis level. The most common area that requires safety advice is related to telephone threats against media workers. The advice given by AJSC and the IMS media safety advisor for Afghanistan has meant that media workers have been better equipped to deal threats as advice has aimed to neutralise the threats at their primary stages. The safety advice component may also extend to the international media active in Afghanistan.

## 5.8 Legal services

Depending on the nature of the challenge and threats faced by the media workers, the AJSC provides access to a legal practitioner or provides legal advice itself. The AJSC has a mobilised and ready-to-respond network of legal professionals dedicated to the cause of providing protection to media workers. This network can also help media workers prosecuted by the government.

## 5.9 Advocacy work

The safety committee engages in systematic advocacy aimed at parliament, security chiefs, the national police, international community (civilian and military), and branches of the government, Taliban, warlords, commanders, informal structures of local governance, tribal elders, and civil society and media outlets.

The aim of this exercise is to shape the context for the work of the safety committee as well as prepare the grounds for improving working conditions for media workers. The advocacy aimed at media outlets focuses on media workers' working conditions, their rights and obligations as stipulated in the contracts and the legal aspects of the type of contracts they sign with their media outlet. The tools used for advocacy also include social media such as Facebook and Twitter, offering journalists an opportunity for virtual networking as well as facilitating a wider public debate, in particular youth's access to information and facts about the conditions under which media workers operate. Roundtables arranged in the provinces, using the Afghan Shura and Jirga tradition have been the important scenes to increase understanding of the role of the media in a conflict.

## 5.10 Supporting female journalists

AJSC at its own level has attempted to address the gender gap by recruiting a female safety coordinator, which despite the isolating appearance has helped female media workers' communication with AJSC.

The female safety coordinators have been active in advocacy, awareness raising, developing a database of female media workers, organising and facilitating capacity development programmes, including on conflict sensitive journalism, social media, ethics of journalism, media law and report writing, networking with human rights and women's rights organisations such as the Independent Human Rights Commission, Afghan Women Skills Development Center, and others.

The female safety coordinators have also contributed to shaping public opinion by writing articles about the conditions under which female media workers operate in Afghanistan. Articles have been published in the 8AM daily, a prestigious newspaper, as well as the website of the International News Safety Institute (INSI) website which is a coalition of news organisations, journalist support groups and individuals exclusively dedicated to the safety of news media staff working in conflicted areas. Close cooperation with women's organisations has been essential to support the AJSC's activities and provide safe accommodation for female media workers in shelters.

# 6. Strategic recommendations for future media development priorities

The following are strategic recommendations for future planning of media development support priorities in Afghanistan based on the needs expressed by local media, the data on current insecure working environment of journalists and IMS' experience in working with the safety of Journalists in Afghanistan since 2009.

Afghanistan's political and security situation continues to present serious challenges for media workers. The safety committee has contributed to the protection measures available to media workers in a number of ways, which continue to remain vital and much needed. The mere presence of such a platform has offered a source of reliance to media workers, in particular to women journalists. The capacity development, counselling, legal services, safety trainings, safe houses, hotlines and coordination services offered to media workers are unparalleled and have made a real difference in the lives and working conditions of media workers. The greatest contribution of it all has been saving lives.

The gender sensitive programming and implementation at the AJSC has helped more women to work in the field of media, a contribution the significance of which is better understood in light of the cultural and social limitations that women in Afghan society face.

This overview and analysis offers the following strategic recommendations for the focus of future media development efforts in Afghanistan:

» *Continuation of systematised protection measures*: The assessment has found direct evidence of the need to not only continue safety measures, but also expand their scope, width and outreach. Safety coordinators have strongly recommended the continuation of safety measures, but not on an ad hoc basis. The increasing uncertainty tied to the post 2014 scenario after a withdrawal necessitates some level of certainty on other fronts, one of them being in the realm of media workers' protection measures.

» *Systematic and joint international and local advocacy planning:* There is a need for greater coordination, planning and importantly, joint cooperation between Afghan media and international media organisations and media support platforms to strengthen efforts around advocacy for media rights and improved working conditions. The international media support organisations can play a critical role in voicing Afghan media's concerns at the international level with the aim of increasing pressure on the national government. International legal services make up another important component here, in particular in relation to international regulatory frameworks to which Afghanistan is a signatory. This is in addition to the support required to push the Afghan legislative branch to move ahead with progressive reforms of the media law.

» *Strengthening Afghan ownership and leadership across the media sector:* There is a serious need to inculcate a sense of ownership and solidarity among the Afghan media workers. To target their dependence on international assistance of a both programmatic and financial nature, a solution may be to introduce a membership fee of the AJSC, as a small contribution which can not only help media workers themselves feel they have ownership in the AJSC, but also enable bottom up accountability.

» *Emphasis on conflict sensitive journalism capacity development*: Lack of professionalisation and capacity to operate in conflict situations is a serious disadvantage for media workers in

Afghanistan. The space for making professional mistakes is very limited for Afghan media workers given the sensitive and crucial nature of the conditions under which they operate. Helping media workers professionalise and contribute to a greater understanding and balanced coverage of the conflict could contribute to reducing the threats they face in their work.

» *Professionalisation and journalistic ethics:* Freedom of Expression does not automatically lead to ethical journalism and balanced and factual journalism. The responsibility of streamlining professionalism rests with the media workers themselves. Lack of professionalism and journalistic ethics can affect the work of an entire community negatively, thus leading to increased pressure from the government, religious groups or even public. Losing the support of the public is something media workers cannot afford.

» *Systematic study of the safety and protection of Afghan media and their needs:* There is need for a expanded, country wide, systematic analysis of the threats that journalists face and more professional risk management analyses which could lead to more organisations taking a holistic approach to media development as opposed to lone engagements in one-off activity-driven projects.

*Improving the working conditions of especially female media workers:* There is a serious need for an intervention that aims at improving working conditions for especially female media workers, for example through the development of an anti-sexual harassment policy at the workplace. Sexual harassment has been a taboo in Afghanistan, a condition, which no longer persists. A government institution operating at the local level developed an anti-sexual harassment policy in March 2013, which has brought down barriers and led the way to serious conversations and subsequent interventions in this area. Another component of this recommendation is ensuring financial security through the establishment of a discretionary fund that has the sole purpose of offering protection to media workers in Afghanistan and hopefully throughout the South and Central Asian region.

» *Increased attention to the professionalisation and safety of TV Journalists and photographers:* Afghan youth's wider access to internet, improved access to ICT services and increased need for visual recording necessitates a transition for traditional Afghan media, where radio followed by print media have traditionally had a greater audience. Most audio pieces can receive wider attention by having an online platform as well as a TV version. The photojournalism component run by IMS as part of the Afghan journalist safety mechanism is about using photography as en empowerment tool. Also safety must be addressed as photographers and TV journalists are more visible when carrying their equipment and are therefore easy targets.

# Annex 1: List of interviewees

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by consultants hired by IMS.

The interviews were carried out in July 2013. The names of interviewees have been omitted for the purposes of personal safety. Face to face interviews were conducted in Kabul Province while phone/Skype and email were used as to reach relevant stakeholders in the eight provinces of Kandahar, Herat, Khost, Ghazni, Nangarhar, Kunduz, Parwan and Balkh

List of interviewees in random order:

> » Mr. Najib Sharifi, AJSC safety coordinator in Kabul.
> » 15 other AJSC staff members and IMS local staff
> » Female AJSC safety coordinator in Mazar-e-Sharif
> » Civil society organisations (like IMS partner CSHRN) active in the field
> » Local media outlets and organisations
> » Mullahs
> » Military representatives
> » Security forces

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