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## RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières (Author)

### Three years of Taliban rule: the violent persecution of 141 journalists detained and arrested in Afghanistan

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In the three years since the Taliban's return to power on 15 August 2021, when the Islamic fundamentalist group captured Kabul, 141 journalists have been arrested or detained. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), who collected first-hand testimonies from these media workers, condemns this atrocious repression of journalists at the hands of a regime bent on suppressing all criticism.

The repression of Afghan journalists has steadily escalated over the past three years. The Taliban regime has targeted journalists on a massive scale, multiplying the number of arrests and pre-trial detentions. Their government throws reporters in prison like criminals under false pretenses. One hundred and forty-one journalists have been arrested or detained since 2021, although no journalists were in jail at the time of this writing.

Journalists in Afghanistan who work with international or exiled media outlets are particularly targeted, accused of slandering the Taliban and espionage for foreign entites. To make matters worse, media workers are also targeted by ISIS and its affiliates, who rival the Taliban: five

journalists have been killed in attacks across the country by the [Islamic State of Khorasan](#) (IS-KP), an ISIS-backed group.

*"When the Taliban regained power in August 2021, their spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid told RSF, 'journalists [...] are not criminals [...]. There will be no threat against them [...]. Soon, they will be able to work as they did before.' Yet the regime has shown a completely different face, dark and tyrannical, in their persecution of journalists. The Taliban sow terror through a multitude of arrests and detentions. There is now almost total censorship and no media criticism of the regime is tolerated. RSF condemns this repression and calls on the supreme leader of the Taliban, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, to end the heinous arrests of media professionals and restore the right to information in the country.*

Célia Mercier

Head of RSF's South Asia Desk

Of the 141 journalists that have been targeted in the past three years, 94 have been arrested — four of them twice — and 47 have been imprisoned. The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) – which is under the control of Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani and directed by Abdul Haq Wasiq, a former prisoner of the US' Guantanamo prison – is particularly [involved](#) in the hunt for journalists.

**"We thought they were going to kill us all, that they were torturing us just for fun."**

RSF has collected first-hand testimonies from journalists who were held in Taliban prisons. For **Khalid Qaderi**, a 29-year-old journalist with *Radio Nowruz* in Herat, a city in the western Afghanistan, the nightmare began in March 2022. The young man, held in the local GDI building, suffered serious abuse from his prison guards. "They would hit me with bits of pipe. Or they'd cover my head with a cloth and pour water over my face so I'd suffocate," he told RSF. After the torture sessions, the guards threw him, unconscious, into his cell. "We were six in a cell designed for one person. It was right under the torture room, so we would hear screaming, sometimes a gunshot, and then silence. We thought they were going to kill us all, that they were torturing us just for fun."

After refusing to eat, Qaderi finally forced himself to consume the scraps of soiled food, mixed with human body hairs, which was left for the prisoners. With his parents under Taliban surveillance, the young man was forced to write a document stating that he was being paid by Israel, the United States and other Western countries to spread their ideology in Afghanistan; that he was ashamed; and that he would not repeat the offense.

In April, Qaderi appeared before a [military court](#) without a lawyer. "I explained to the judge that under the Republic, for 20 years, we used to

criticize the government, that it was normal for us. The judge replied that journalists were responsible for the Taliban's bad image." He was incarcerated in Herat prison after receiving a one-year sentence. "I was in the 'political prisoners' block," he explained, noting that in his cell, half of the sixty-odd inmates were ISIS recruits, while the other half were teachers and members of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), a group who oppose the Taliban. "Every night, we organized guard shifts to prevent members of ISIS from attacking us. I had written on Facebook that I wasn't religious, the guards knew this and called me the 'infidel'. The ISIS men threatened to kill me."

After an altercation with an ISIS supporter, the guards violently hit Qaderi on the soles of his feet. "I couldn't get up for several weeks. They carried me to force me to pray," he recalls. He was finally released in January 2023. Over a year and a half after his liberation, the scars on Qaderi's body still serve as reminders of the violence he was subjected to. The psychological trauma also persists: "Some mornings I open my eyes and, for a few moments, I still think I'm waking up in that prison."

### "There was a journalist on every floor"

A few days after Qaderi's release, French-Afghan journalist **Mortaza Behboudi**, now 30, was [arrested in the Afghan capital](#) while reporting outside Kabul University. After 11 days in a local intelligence police station, Behboudi, who works with numerous French media such as *France Télévisions* and *Médiapart*, was transferred to the GDI's headquarters in central Kabul. Behboudi shared a windowless cell in the building's basement that measured five square meters with thirty inmates, which was permanently flooded with blinding light. At night, the prisoners are taken handcuffed and blindfolded to the torture room. "We didn't know where the blows were going to come from." Blows came from rifle butts and cables, and guards also administered electric shocks and simulated drowning. "They also pulled out five of my teeth, others had their fingers cut off."

After a month and a half, Behboudi was sent to the GDI's Shash-Darak (D40) prison in Kabul, where 1,200 political prisoners were detained. He was locked in a cell measuring three square meters with 12 other inmates, including members of ISIS. "They tried to suffocate me with a sheet while I was sleeping," he recounts, "there was a journalist on every floor." The guards would use iron bars in the courtyard's alcoves to suspend inmates and beat the soles of their feet. "One night, a fellow inmate hanged himself in our cell. This happened often in this prison," Behboudi said. At the end of July, he was transferred to Pul-e-Charkhi prison, a penitentiary for common law prisoners, and was finally liberated in October 2023.

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