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## **Rethinking Media in Conflict Zones**

**How can journalists minimize safety risks whilst reporting on conflicts?**

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*Hamed Elmi was born on Oct 25, 1962 in Kabul. In 1983 he joined Afghan Freedom Fighters, also known as “Mujahedeen”, in the armed struggle against the Soviet invaders and the Government in Kabul. He began to work as a journalist in 1984 at the Afghan Information Center- a well-known news agency covering Jihadi operations- and was appointed as BBC’s Radio researcher in 1988. During the early 1990s he joined Voice of America (VOA) as a reporter covering the civil war in Afghanistan. In 2003 he was appointed as Head of the Monitoring Department of the Office of the Spokesperson to the President of Afghanistan and was later promoted to the position of Deputy Spokesperson and Head of Communications. In mid 2004, served as Spokesperson for Hamid Karzai’s campaign team. In April of 2005, he was appointed as the Cultural Attaché to the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington DC and in Nov. 2007 as Senior Advisor and Director of Communications at the Ministry of Education. In Feb 2009 he was appointed as deputy spokesperson to the president. Since beginning his career as a journalist, Mr. Elmi has authored six books as well as numerous articles on Afghanistan’s political and military situation, history and culture.*

## **Good afternoon**

I am glad to be here once again and will begin by thanking all of my Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development distinguished friends; Mr. Jawad Mottagi, Mr. Marcel Gomez, Raneer, Lotfa, Juliette, Madhu and all members of the organizing committee and those who sponsored this event at this great hotel.

I was a reporter during the war in my country in the 1980s. Afghanistan has witnessed three conflicts over the past 30 years:

1. War against the Soviet Union invasion in 80s,
2. Internal conflict between armed factions in early 90s, and,
3. The war against international terrorism from 1995 to date.

My presentation today is focused on three questions:

1. How can a journalist be successful in a war zone?
2. How can journalist minimize safety risks whilst reporting conflicts?
3. What can we do to save the lives of our colleagues?

### **1. How can a journalist be successful in a war zone?**

#### **a. Credibility – Trustworthiness**

Credibility and confidence-building are two very important aspects of reporting a conflict. Journalists need to make sure that both sides of a conflict recognize them as professional journalists who are not associated with any intelligence organization, and that they are fully aware of the journalist's impartiality.

#### **b. Knowing how to practice journalism.**

Journalists must know how to use “direct quotes” in a war zone, and ensure that they maintain balance while reporting. They also need to be sure that they stick with the basics of journalistic reporting methods as a misquote create a serious trouble for journalists, provoking the angry fighters against them as well as inflaming an already sensitive dynamic between the parties involved in the conflict.

#### **c. Studying the roots of the conflict**

Prior to reporting on the conflict, the journalist must have researched and become very familiar with the roots of the conflict, the players involved and the sensitivities that country or region. This is essential as uninformed reporting can inflame the crisis, put the journalist at risk and alienate one side or the other which in turn means that they will not be granted interviews with both sides as it will be felt that they are unable to represent

them. In fact if a journalist shows sympathy with the “wrong” side it can cause risk for him/her and their team mates.

**d. Background of the fighting groups**

An understanding of the background of the fighting groups can minimize the risk whilst in a war zone. When a journalist reports from Palestine, for example, they must know who the key personalities in the fighting are and what sort of relationship the parties have with various media organizations is, and particularly the agency you are working for. It is amazing how many foreign journalists come to Afghanistan wanting to cover a particular angle to a story but who are completely ignorant of the background of the conflict, the players and the impact that their preconceived notions can have on the conflict.

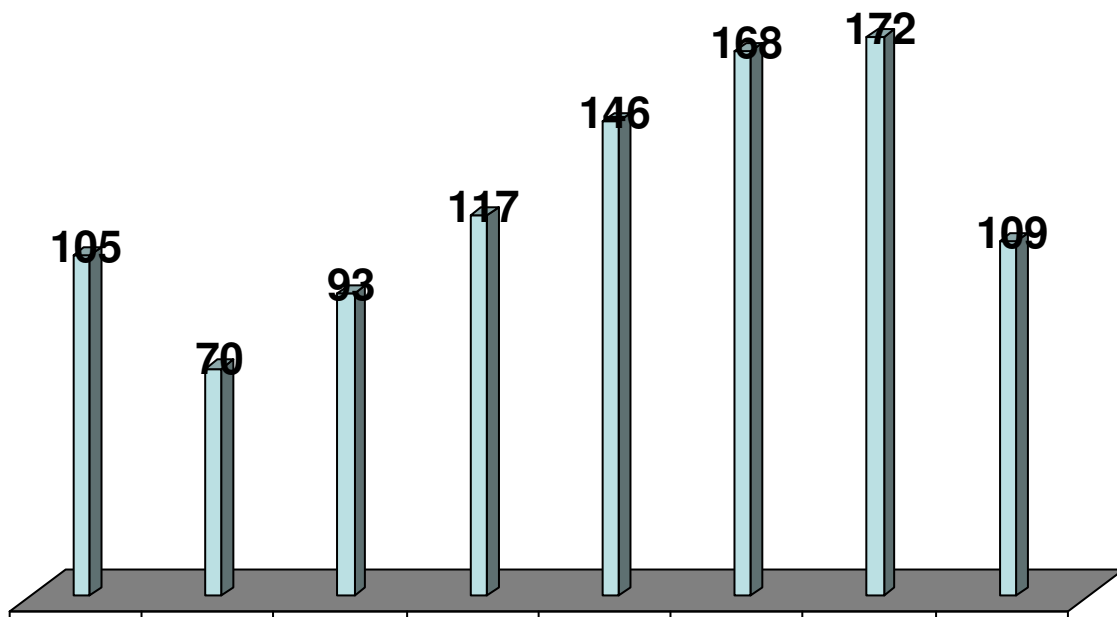
**e. Cultural & Religious sensitivity**

Journalists should also be familiar with and respect the cultural values of a country or a society they are reporting on, especially during the war when the fighting and situation is very tense. For example a journalist working in an Islamic country must be very careful on several fronts, including showing any kind of pictures of women. This applies in Afghanistan as do other considerations such as respecting the tribal systems, religious factors and linguistic clashes between ethnic groups.

**f. Contact persons**

It will be very useful for journalists in fighting zones to find a contact persons or trustworthy guide. On several occasions my contact person or guide saved my life because he knew the fighters and their party affiliations.

**Journalists and Media Staff Killed**  
(2001-2008)



Source: International News Safety Institute

## 2. How can journalists minimize safety risks whilst reporting on conflicts?

### a. Localities

**I. Geographical landscape:** High mountains, lack of oxygen, heat or cold can cause risk for journalists whilst reporting from the war zone. These types of circumstances require that the journalist ensures that they have a high level of personal fitness and are able to endure demanding physical environments.

**II. Neighboring countries:** Journalist must anticipate the need to leave the country in a hurry and as such must make sure that they have an exit strategy. When reporting from Sri Lanka for example, he/she must consider that there is no land border with another country. If the ports and airports are under siege there would be no way to leave the country and if a journalist were reporting from the northeast of Afghanistan they would encounter a serious enough lack of oxygen to significantly affect their ability to function and their ability to escape across the mountainous terrain into a neighbouring country.

**III. Area map:** A map of the area, particularly when in a city where fighting is going on, is very important and a journalist should familiarize themselves with the layout of the city and identify possible exit routes. This is especially important if your local guide is no longer available.

**IV. Water supply system:** You can't survive without water - can you? Journalists must be aware of how safe the local water is or if it is even available. You must ensure that you have sufficient personal quantities of bottled water. If you are reporting from Sudan or the eastern region of Afghanistan you may not be able to find any drinking water due to the vast areas of desert and lack of infrastructure.

**V. Shelter:** Bunkers, caves, trees and forest can minimize risk however only if you anticipate the need to use them and you identify them in advance. It is very important for journalists to know the exact location of these places whilst reporting from a war zone.

### b. Weapons used by both sides of the conflict

**I. Back fire:** The journalist must have some knowledge of the military equipment being used by both



side of the conflict. I remember a journalist who stood at the back of an RPG (Anti-tank rocket propelled grenade) when the fighters fired on a tank. The RPG produces up to 1000 centigrade heat that blasts out of the back of the weapon so you can imagine the impact that that had on the journalist.

**II. Destruction range:** Journalist should know the destruction range of weapons especially bombs and rockets. I was in the city of Khost in 1991 when a SCUD missile landed near us. My guide recognized its roar before it landed and he ordered me to lie-down inside a furrow. That missile destroyed more than 100 meter square around us and demolished almost every thing. Obviously we had survived but only because my guide knew the range of destruction that the missile would impact.

**III. Type of bombs:** Knowledge of the kind of bombs being used in the conflict can minimize the risk of journalists as you will know how close to get to “the action” as well as understand the level of personal risk that you are exposed to.

**IV. Type of mines:** Mines kill hundreds of combatants around the world; knowing the types and specifications of those likely to be in your area is very important and can save your life.

**c. Names of the local commanders**

**I. Territory:** Journalist should know the territory of a commander during fighting between two rival groups to ensure that they do not find themselves in the wrong area; mistakes in this regard can present a huge risk.

**II. Party affiliations:** When two or more groups are fighting in an area or region, the journalist must know the party affiliation of the groups involved.

**III. Friends & foes:** Journalists must have a clear picture of the friends and foes of local commanders or combatants. Sometimes journalists’ may need take refuge with his friend and to escape the foes.

**IV. Contact Person:** The contact person or guide of a fighting party or commander is very helpful and he/she can provide tremendous assistance to the journalist in crucial times.

**d. Military knowledge**

**I. Hit and run:** Hit and run tactics significantly reduce the safety risk for a journalist and media staff whilst reporting from the battlefield.

**II. Checkpoints:** Combatants and all governments have their own rules for the checkpoints. It is very important for a journalist to follow the regulations. Some journalist put their lives at risk when they approach with disregard for the rules or in a way that is not sensitive to the situation at hand.

#### e. Medical Care

**I. First aid:** Journalists who are going to report from a combat zone must have knowledge of First Aid (ideally Combat First Aid) as well as familiarity around the usage of some common medicines, their usage and administration. Wound treatment, knowing how to stop wound bleeding and the taking of painkillers can be a part of daily life for a journalist reporting from war zones.

**II. Infections & Local disease:** Journalist should be familiar with local infections, diseases and how to recognize and treat them. Bullets and bombs are not the only killers in a war; disease can be more dangerous where there is no doctor or proper medicine available.

Journalists are not only threatened by tanks, helicopters, bombs, mines and angry gunmen. Another very serious threat, especially in mountainous or dry countries like Afghanistan, is that of insects and creatures such as poisonous snakes, scorpions, killer bees, killer spiders and the mosquitoes carrying Malaria and other illnesses.



These creatures have their own kingdom. They do not like journalists☺. And they most definitely do not respect the freedom of the press!

### 3. What can we do to save the lives of our colleagues?

#### a. Financial Considerations

Most of journalists, especially freelancers, are eager to find “Hot” news and they are desperate to get into conflict zones. These journalists often have very limited income and very few resources. Sometimes when they are in trouble or injured in a war zone they don’t have enough funds for treatment or to get

to better medical care. Local journalists are also more vulnerable and often require international assistance.

**b. Free “hostile situation” training**

Most journalists going to war zones have limited knowledge about the war or conflict and various safety tactics. Some large news agencies and media firms like BBC World Service provide the necessary training to provide their staff with appropriate safety and survival training. Recently the International News Safety Institute (INSI) trained 35 Russian journalists. Although this is a great start we need to ensure that all journalists have access to such training and information. It is not acceptable that freelance journalists and those from smaller media organizations are not able to have this training as they are unable to pay private security companies for it.



**c. Bullet proof jackets – Body armor**

Bullet proof jackets and body armor reduces the risk of physical injury however once again access to such equipment is a question of money and the lack of it for both the freelancer and small media organizations. International organizations, NGO’s and governments need to act and provide support to journalists for this purpose.

**d. Insurance**

Insurance companies are not willing to insure those journalists who want to go to war zones. They have a list of so called non-safe countries. What is the journalist with a family to do if they are injured or suffer long-term disability. We must ensure that there is access to insurance for journalists.

**e. International campaign**

An international campaign is needed to address the issue of media harassment, kidnapping and torture. Although journalists will often have knowingly put themselves in harm’s way (or have broken the rules) for the sake of the story they must also consider that in many countries where they operate they do not and will not enjoy the freedoms that they are accustomed to in the West.

We must also find a way to influence those parties or governments who threaten and intimidate media. It may be helpful for international and local journalists to produce reports or documentaries about the issues and challenges they face. Media organization and journalists could also implement their own form of influence by simply not giving coverage or conducting a boycott campaign against those parties or government who are threaten and killing the media.

**f. Exchange of knowledge and experience**

Journalists and media staff from around the world must participate in seminars, conferences and gatherings to exchange their knowledge and experience with others. Governments, NGO's, local and international media organizations should sponsor and host journalists at their conferences and gatherings as a way of information sharing and problem solving.