

# 2018 Annual Report

**Afghanistan Journalists Safety Committee**

## Summary

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In 2018, AJSC has recorded a total of 121 cases of violence against journalists and media workers, including cases of murder, injury, threats, temporary detention, abduction, and many more. 17 journalists and media workers were killed this year, which once again places Afghanistan as the most dangerous country for journalists. In addition to 17 cases of murder, AJSC registered 15 cases of injury, 21 cases of physical assault, 38 cases of threats and intimidation, 23 cases of insults and mistreatment, 1 case of inappropriate expulsion of journalist by a media manager, 5 cases of temporary detention, and 1 case of abduction.

The statistics of violence against journalists in 2018 show a 28% decline compared to 2017, as in 2017, the committee recorded 169 cases of violence against journalists and media workers. Similarly, murder figures show a 15% decrease compared to 2017 in which 20 journalists and media workers were killed. From 17 cases of murder in this year, the Taliban and ISIS have been responsible for 15 cases, the perpetrator of the two other cases of murder are unidentified.

Similar to 2017, ISIS and the Taliban are responsible for the majority of cases of violence, namely 50 cases. Individuals affiliated with the government rank second, as they are responsible for 44 cases of violence. Unidentified individuals come third, as they are responsible for 16 cases of violence. Powerful individuals (warlords, local militia, power brokers) are responsible for 6 cases, and media managers are responsible for 5 cases of mistreatment.

From 121 cases of violence recorded this year, 11 of it was perpetrated against women journalists and media workers.

In 2018, the majority of cases of violence, which constitute 42 cases, took place in Kabul zone, which is composed of Kabul, Parwan, Kapisa and Panjsher. The western zone (Heraat, Farah, Badghees, Nemroz and Ghor), with 22 cases, come second. The least number of cases of violence, 6 cases, occurred in the northern zone (Balkh, Jawzjan, Faryab and Sare Pul).

One of the most challenging experience occurred in 2018 was the change in the nature of the threats against journalists. The terrorist groups are looking for the chances to target journalists collectively and have proven this on two separate occasions. On April 30, they targeted a crowd of journalists in Shashdarak – Kabul, killing 9 journalists. In another incident on September, two staff of Tolo TV were targeted and murdered. On both occasions, journalists were targeted when they gather at the scene of the first terrorist incident for news coverage.

Although the change in the nature of threats against journalists is a matter of deep concern, the majority of media outlets have not taken proper security measures to protect their office and staff. Meanwhile, the government has not placed any effort to reduce the vulnerability of journalists covering terrorist incidents and other hostile situations. When it comes to journalists, a large number of them have not learned the safety skills required for their protection. Additionally, based on AJSC observation, those journalists who have learned the safety skills and have attended the training programs, do not adhere the safety measures as well.

In 2018, a total of 34 media outlets stopped operation, and 57 new media outlets were established. The outlets that had to close down their operation belonged to various parts of Afghanistan. 1 was based in the north-eastern zone (Baghland, Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan), 5 in the central zone (Ghazni, Bamyán, Wardak, Daikundi), 4 in western zone (Heart, Farah, Nemroz, Badghees and Ghor), 1 in eastern zone (Nengrahar, Laghman, Kunar), 2 in northern zone (Balkh, Jawzjan, Sare Pul, Faryab), and 21 media outlets in the zone of Kabul (Kabul, Parwan, Kapisa and Panjshir provinces). From the newly established media outlets, 5 were

established in the northeastern zone, 4 in the central zone, 4 in the western zone, 2 in the eastern zone, 1 in the southwestern zone (Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Zabul), 5 in the northern zone, 4 in the southeastern zone (Khost, Pakteya, Paktika), and 32 in the zone of Kabul.

From 34 media outlets no longer active, 4 were TV stations, 10 Radio stations, 18 print media, and 2 digital media.

From 57 newly established media, 13 are TV stations, 13 Radio stations, 25 print media, and 6 online media.

Access to information remains a challenge to journalism. This challenge, until not fundamentally resolved, affects the quality of information and makes the work of journalists difficult.

## Preface

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As the previous years, the year 2018 was a bloody and challenging year for journalists and media community in Afghanistan. The increase in violence, insecurity, and instability also impacted journalists and the media, as their scope of activities shrunk due to increased threats. The increased threats against journalists also compelled journalists and media, particularly those operating in insecure areas to resort to self-censorship. Meanwhile, this year, the change in the nature of threats against journalists and media has further restricted their operational capabilities and deterred journalists from collective coverage of war and terrorist incidents. The deliberate and direct targeting of journalists in two separate terrorist incidents took the life of 11 journalists this year.

Journalists and media remained in the center of attention of the warring sides. ISIS and Taliban are frequently trying to influence or control the content of media through propaganda or imposition of intimidation and threats. The government has also, in some cases, been the perpetrator of intimidation and violence against some of the media outlets. The recent behavior of Mr. Murtazawi, Deputy Spokesperson of the President, with the hosts of Radio Arman is a good point of reference for such cases of misbehavior.

This year, the economic challenges faced by the vast majority of the media has increased, prompting a large number of media outlets to reduce their content production or even stop broadcasting. Based on the data gathered by AJSC, 34 media outlets stopped operation in 2018, most of them because of economic constraints. The exacerbation of financial challenges has raised serious concerns about the survival of media as one of the greatest achievements of the past one and a half decade. Meanwhile, access to information and cooperation of government employees in providing information to journalists and media remains an obstacle.

This report, in addition to evaluating the safety situation of journalists, briefly discusses the major issues and developments of journalism and dissemination of information in 2018. It is worth mentioning that the cases recorded during this reporting period were based on AJSC's policy with regards to data collection. The Committee has only registered cases of violence and threats against journalists which have a direct connection to their journalistic work or have been perpetrated during reporting.

### **Some examples of violence and threats against journalists in 2018:**

On April 30, 2018, a group of journalists while covering a suicide attack in Shashdarak Kabul, were targeted by a second suicide bomber, killing 9 and wounding five journalists as a result. This was the first attack targeting a group of journalists covering a terrorist incident. On the same day, a journalist in Kandahar province and another one in Khost province were attacked and murdered.

On September 5, a reporter and cameraman of Tolo TV were killed while providing live coverage of a suicide attack in the west of Kabul. They were killed by a second explosion where a vehicle improvised with explosives blew up at the site of the first explosion where the journalists were standing for live coverage.

On January 25, the head of Heraat Court summoned an Afghan Women News Agency's reporter through a formal letter due to publication of an article on corruption in the courts of the province. Since the summoning of the reporter had no legal basis, AJSC intervened and resolved the issue.

On January 20, a host of Radio Sada-e-Adalat was broadcasting live when a group of unknown individuals set the studio of the radio on fire. The host called the police to inform them of the incident. Police arrested him and accused him of being responsible for the incident. AJSC immediately intervened and transferred him to Kabul to be under AJSC's protection until Attorney General's Office resolved his case.

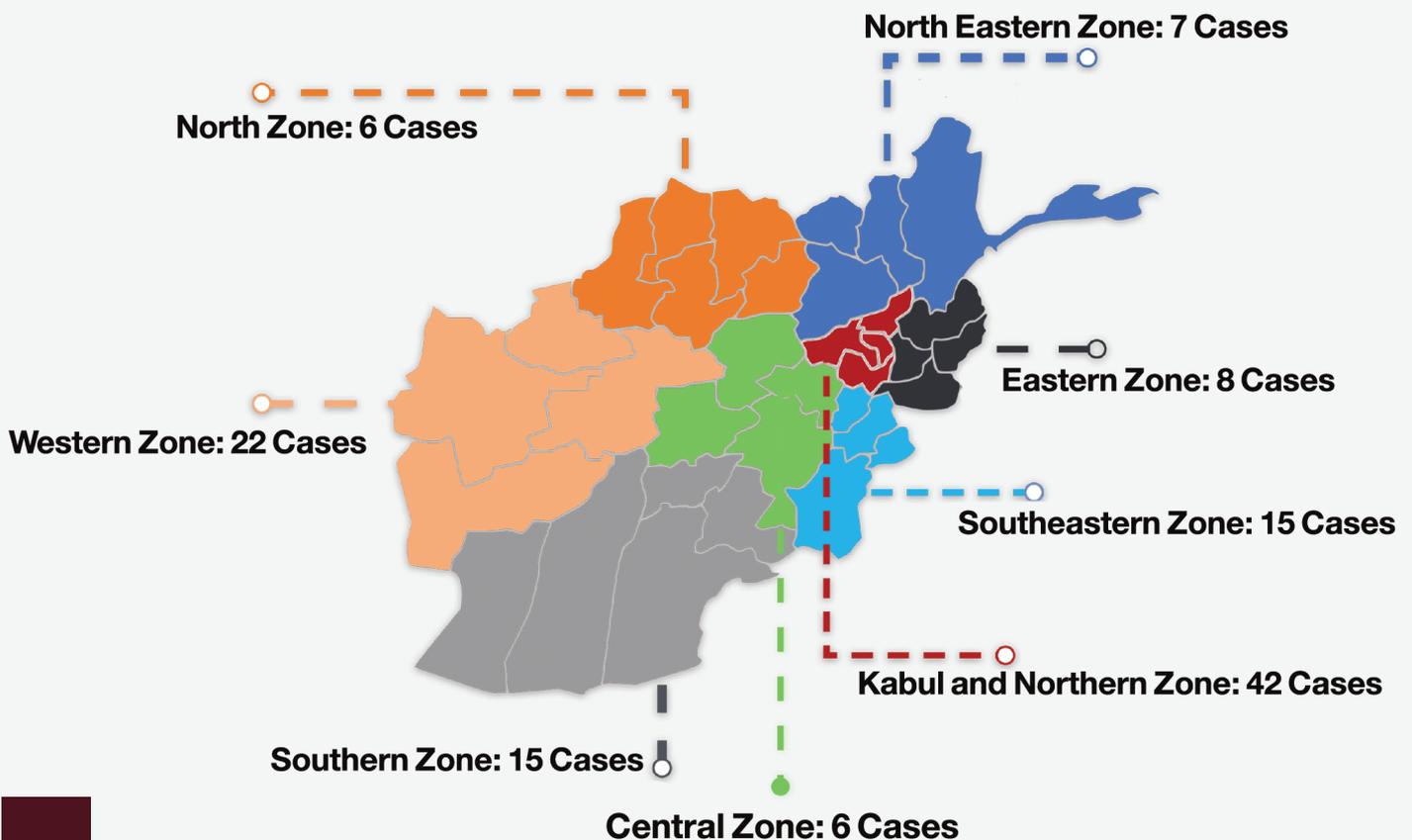
On July 19, a reporter from Shamshad TV, while attempting to report a clash between two tribes, who were fighting over acquiring national identification card, was coerced by the gunmen affiliated to one of the disputing sides to report in their favor. They then abducted the reporter and kept him in their custody. The case was resolved through mediation by AJSC representative and the reporter was released.

# 121 cases of violence against journalists in 2018

## Types of Violence



## Violence in Provincial Zones



## Statistics of Violence by Gender

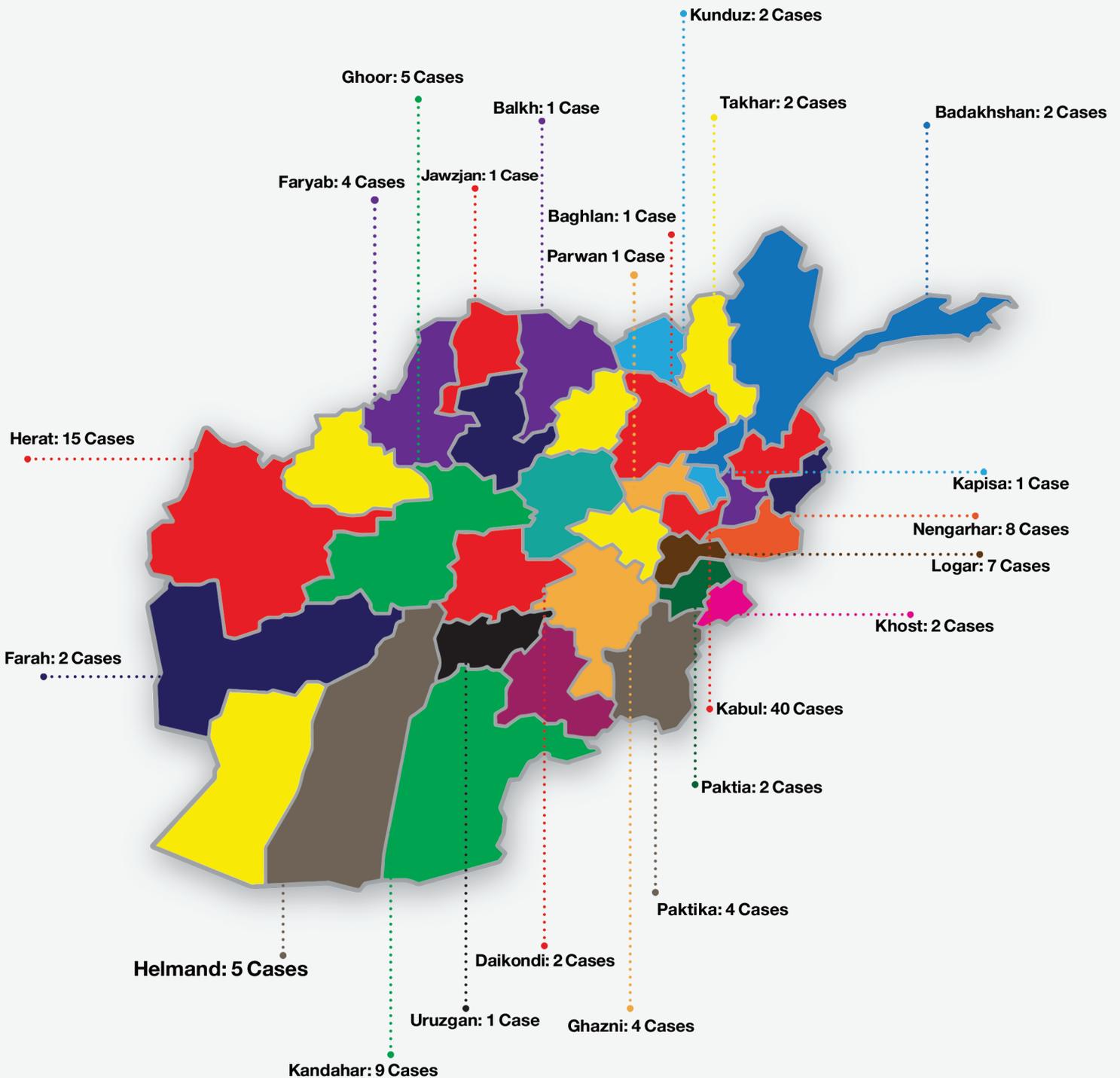
Women: 11



Men: 110

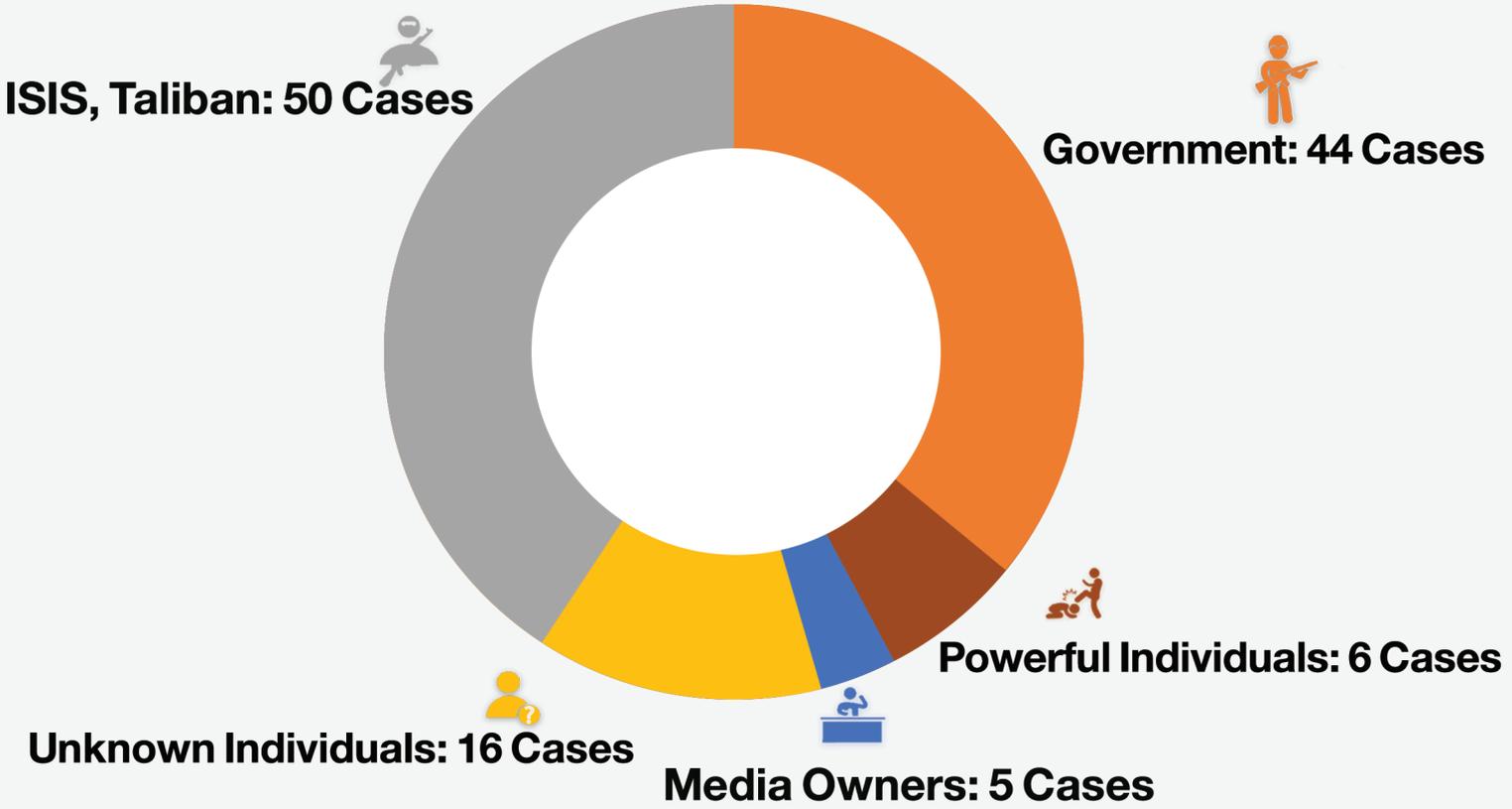


## Breakdown of Violence in the Provinces of Afghanistan



Perpetrators of Violence

2018



|   |                      |     |
|---|----------------------|-----|
| ■ | ISIS, Taliban        | 41% |
| ■ | Government           | 37% |
| ■ | Unknown Individuals  | 13% |
| ■ | Powerful individuals | 5%  |
| ■ | Media Owners         | 4%  |

## Change in the Nature of Threats against Media

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One of the most prominent developments of 2018 was the shift in the nature of threats against journalists. In 2018, the Afghan media community witnessed the first deliberate and direct attack targeting a group of journalists. Nine journalists were killed on April 30, in a terrorist attack that targeted journalists directly. In another incident that occurred on September 5, two journalists who were covering a terrorist incident were killed. In both occasions, journalists were targeted by a second explosion while they were covering the terrorist attacks. Based on AJSC's analysis, the change in the nature of the threats against journalists is due to the shift in the approach of the terrorist groups towards journalists.

When the Taliban realized that media outlets refuse to yield to their requests to give more prominence to the activities and operations of the Taliban in their coverage and cover their statements, they became hostile towards the media. The beginning of this hostility was the fall of Kunduz province to the hand of Taliban in 2015. Following the fall of this province, the Taliban declared Tolo TV and 1TV as military targets because they accused Tolo TV of directing baseless accusations against the Taliban. In January 2016, they targeted a van carrying Tolo TV's staff, which killed 7 journalists and injured more than 20. After that, the attacks targeting buildings of media outlets and journalists individually continued, until in 2018 Afghanistan witnessed its worst type, an attack on a group of journalists in Shashdarak, Kabul.

ISIS based in Afghanistan has also been perpetuating violence and threats against journalists. They have been behind a large number of attacks against journalists in the country. They even claimed responsibility for the attack they conducted on the group of journalists in April 2018 which resulting in the killing of 7 journalists. In Nengrahar province in the east, threats directed by ISIS against journalists even includes family members of journalists. The ISIS radio would even name journalists and their family members and would offer threats that the group would kill journalists and their family members.

The change in the nature of the threat against the media and journalists is also linked to the escalation of conflict in Afghanistan and the fact that the war is gaining more of a proxy nature. A large number of regional countries and international powers are fighting in Afghanistan through their proxies and the warring sides are trying to promote their own agenda and interests in the war through influencing media.

Based on AJSC's analysis, another reason behind targeting of journalists is the news value of murdering journalists. Since domestic and International media widely cover the news of journalists' killings, terrorist groups use this as an effective strategy to achieve their goal of being in the headlines of the news worldwide and advertise their presence and activities. consequently, when they see that killing of reporters leads to massive news coverage, attacks on journalists and media become worthwhile for these groups.

The important role media play in the dissemination of information and educating the public is another reason for the change in the attitude of terrorist groups towards journalists and media outlets. These groups do not see their interests in an informed and educated population so through attacking the media, they most likely intend to diminish the role of the media in enlightening the public. On the first day of capturing Ghazni city in August 2018, the Taliban destroyed the antennas and transmitters of media outlets and killed one technical staff of state-run National Radio Television (RTA). First, they deactivated the media stations based in the province and then burned the telecommunication equipment. They then activated their own Radio (Radio Shariat) to promote their own activities and objectives.

Considering the change in the nature of threats against journalists, with the exception of limited media, neither reporters nor the media outlets have taken the necessary steps to reduce their vulnerability. Recently, AJSC developed a safety guideline outlining the safety and security measures crucial for covering war and terrorist incidents. The safety guideline also proposes in-house safety measures necessary for the protection of journalists and the media houses. The guideline was introduced and finalized during the commemoration

of the international day to end impunity against journalists hosted by AJSC on November 1, 2018. In the event, aside from journalists and media managers from all across the country, Afghanistan's second Vice President Sarwar Danish and UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA, Tadamichi Yamamoto, were also present.

The guideline was reviewed by journalists and media managers during the event and their recommendations and feedback were documented and incorporated in the guideline. Following the event, the Safety Guideline was sent to all media outlets based in Kabul and other provinces of the country. A copy of this guideline was sent to the Ministry of Information and Culture and to the Joint Committee for Safety and Security of Journalists and Media.

For the purpose of providing safety guidance to Journalists and media outlets, AJSC conducts safety training for journalists all over the country to equip them with the necessary skills and reduce their vulnerability to threats. Meanwhile, the committee's security advisor, upon request, assists the media outlets in improving the security of their establishments and creating security policies and procedures.

## **Competition Between the Media Outlets Over Speedy News Coverage and Its Impact on Safety**

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Due to the multitude of media, each outlet wants to get ahead of others in collecting news, pictures and videos and broadcasting them. The same competition has made certain outlets to attach high value to the live coverage of the incidents so that they can attain more viewership. The competition, while still partially positive, is not accompanied by meaningful safety measures to journalists who go to the scene for coverage, thus rising safety threats against field journalists.

It is unfortunate that the media's emphasis on taking the lead is not accompanied by the observance of safety measures necessary for the protection of their employees. The absolute majority of media outlets do not provide the basic safety equipment to their journalists they send to the site of incident. They do not provide journalists with the necessary safety training, and even remain reluctant to allow their employees to participate in the safety training courses offered by the organizations supporting journalists, such as AJSC.

furthermore, a number of media outlets whose reporters or employees have been injured or killed during the course of their duties, are not willing to provide for treatment of injured and support the families of those who have lost their lives.

Only Tolo TV has established a clear policy to secure the rights of journalists, who are harmed as result of their professional works, but the other media outlets have not committed to doing such so far. Journalists have also remained indifferent towards the safety imperative. Despite tremendous threats against journalists, they place being the first to reach the incident site for coverage ahead of taking essential safety measures for their protection. Despite repeated attempts by AJSC to persuade journalists to ensure full vigilance towards safety matters while going to the field for reporting, journalists still maintain a reckless attitude towards their safety.

## Access to information

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Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are among the greatest achievements of Afghanistan's in the last 17 years. Today, the country's journalist community maintains a leading role in promoting and strengthening transparency, democracy and institutionalizing the culture of accountability.

Access to information is considered as one of the important aspects of freedom of expression and is clearly stipulated in Article 50 of the Constitution. Unfortunately, this principle is not fully respected by government institutions. Nonexistence of culture of access to information and the lack of cooperation by the government institutions has become a serious challenge toward activities of journalists, and has negatively impacted the flow of information. Although the law on access to information was endorsed by the president in 2014 and based on the law the Access to Information Oversight Commission was established, the challenges journalists face in accessing the information from the government institutions are still in place.

The challenge of access to credible information from government institutions is not limited to the capital. The lack of access to information in the provinces has been increasing and, in most cases, journalists have very limited access to information. In most of the provinces, specifically Herat and Nangarhar - with most complaints, reporters claim that they have been given easy access to provincial meetings and high-level government gathering, but when it comes to the investigative reports the government institutions and officials do not provide the required information and reject their explicit requests.

Unfortunately, the government has not taken effective measures to resolve the issue of lack of access to information and the journalists still face the problem in most of the country's provinces. AJSC, in order to solve this issue, has made extensive efforts during this year. The organization has conducted several meetings with high-level government officials in Kabul and provinces. The purpose of these meetings was to advocate for implementation of the law on access to information and work toward institutionalizing the culture of access to information in the government institutions.

In 2018, 23 complaints were referred to the Access to Information Oversight Commission and all the cases were handled by the Commission somehow. From among the cases referred to the Commission, an absolute majority of it was on the failure of the government officials to provide information for the investigative reports, or on the projects and contracts related to mines. In certain cases, even the instructions given by the Commission regarding the provision of information to journalists were ignored by the government officials.

Due to the aforementioned reasons and non-observance of the right to access information, the Law on access to information published on Official Gazette 2014, was reviewed and amended based on international standards and its revised version was endorsed by the President through a legislative decree.

This new law regulates the new standard of right to access information, such as provision of legal protection for whistleblowers, obliging all government authorities to provide information, online information request forms, making the Access to Information Oversight Commission independent body, establishment of selection committee to introduce the members of the commission, specifying semi judiciary cases while making decision against offenders, among the others, are the most important principles incorporated in the law. The new incorporations in the law, in fact, guarantee the right to access information in the future and remove the existing barriers in this regard. Now that the Law is approved and the Commission to oversight the implementation of the Law on access to information is established, the government must provide legal and political support for the efforts of this commission.

## Conclusion

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Although the number of violence against journalists has decreased compared to 2017, the level of threats against journalists and media is still very high. This point has to be taken very seriously because of the change in the nature of threats against journalist and media. The deliberate and direct attacks by terrorist groups against media and journalists and the failure of government and media houses in taking proper measures for the protection of journalists has increased their vulnerability.

Considering the change in the nature of threats, neither the Afghan government, nor the media, nor journalists have taken necessary measures to reduce their vulnerability. Consequently, the majority of media houses and journalists are still vulnerable in terms of safety and security. Escalation of violence in the country, the asymmetric nature of the war and the fact that the proxy aspect of the current conflict is becoming more prominent are among the reasons for the media and journalists to be the prime focus of warring sides.

Growing threats against media has compelled media outlets to commit self-censorship. Especially, the self-censorship is clearly seen in the media houses domiciled in parts of the country where the Taliban's influence or presence is greater. This self-censorship has led to atrocities of the Taliban and ISIS remain unreported in the volatile areas of Afghanistan.

The safety guideline developed by AJSC to enhance safety of media outlets and journalists has been disseminated to media outlets, government and security organizations, but they have not been implemented by media houses and journalists yet. Implementation and adherence of this guideline, which is formulate based on the current threats and vulnerabilities of journalists and media, can decrease the amount of risks undermining the safety of journalists and media houses to a substantial level.

Despite the fact that Afghanistan has been ranked to possess the best Law on access to information, access to information is still a major challenge for journalists and media. If this problem is not answered, journalists will be forced to refer to unofficial sources of information, which will result in more inaccuracy in the statistics released by the media.

Establishment of the Access to Information Commission as an independent body with independent funding is a positive step toward alleviating the issue of access to information. This Commission is based in Kabul and has representatives in the provinces to ensure that the provisions of the law are observed by relevant stakeholders.

Aside from the variety of challenges the media community is struggling with, especially the financial problems, 57 new media outlets have been established in 2018. Meanwhile, 34 media outlets stopped operation, mainly due to financial challenges. 23 new media outlets adding up to the media family of Afghanistan is a point of hope for maintaining multitude and diversity of the media in Afghanistan.

## Recommendations

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Threats against journalists and the media should be considered serious and serious practical measures need to be taken towards mitigating threats. The Afghan government must take meaningful measures to respond to the changing nature of threats against journalists and media, review the current security measures and create effective security coordination mechanism with media and journalists. However, introducing serious security measures for the protection of journalists and media can in no way allow the government to attempt to influence the media or its independent reporting. The media, in coordination with the security agencies and AJSC, must carefully and rigorously observe the provisions of safety guideline prepared by AJSC, and in case they need technical assistance, they can always refer to AJSC for safety advice and assistance. Furthermore, journalists are required to carefully read the content of this guideline and observe them when they report from the field. In the safety guideline prepared by AJSC, all of the important security measures and safety steps have been outlined for journalist and media houses.

In order to improve the safety of journalists and the media, and eliminate existing threats, coordination between media, journalists, security agencies and organizations supporting media should increase. As the level of threats increases, the role of coordination and collaboration becomes vital for improving security and safety of the media community. If threats against the media are not eliminated, freedom of press will incur major setback because of the increase in self-censorship and the reduction of the quality of reporting.

Reporters must participate in the free-of-cost safety training programs offered by AJSC. Media managers must allow their staff to attend these training programs and learn the important safety measures. Adherence of the safety guidelines can greatly reduce the risks undermining the safety of journalists. Additionally, journalists must refrain from collective coverage of incidents without proper security measures and safety equipment, except when the area is blocked by security forces and entrance of other individuals are not allowed.

The government must implement the safety guideline immediately so the journalists can cover the terrorist incidents safely.

The government must also ensure that the Law on Access to information is implemented in its entirety. The implementation of this law will not only facilitate the work of journalists, but will also be a major step towards reducing corruption.

The International community must prioritize supporting media and freedom of expression and create development plans to support media struggling with serious financial problems. The international community has played an important role in the growth of free media and the promotion of freedom of expression in Afghanistan, which the international community, the Afghan government and the people of Afghanistan are proud of. Saying that, the international community should not allow financial and security challenges to decay one of the greatest achievements of Afghanistan. The international community must also place the safety of journalists in the agenda of their work with the Afghan government, specifically with security institutions.