SYMPOSIUM REPORT: "AFGHANISTAN: FROM MARGINS TO THE CENTER — A MEDIA PERSPECTIVE"

Dec 7, 2024

On December 4, 2024, the Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization (AJSO) hosted the **"Afghanistan: From Margins to the Center — A Media Perspective"** symposium in Berlin, Germany. This pivotal event gathered over 70 participants, including exiled Afghan journalists, international media professionals, scholars, human rights advocates, and media experts, to address the pressing challenges faced by Afghan journalists and the broader media landscape. Supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation **(FNF),** the symposium sought to elevate Afghanistan's place in global discussions, focusing on the role of media in conflict zones and the strategic importance of sustaining Afghanistan's narrative on the international stage.

Opening Session: A Call for Global Advocacy

The symposium began with a welcome address from **Hamid Obaidi**, Founder and Chairperson of **AJSO**. Obaidi underscored the pivotal role of international media in shining a spotlight on Afghanistan's social, political, and human rights issues. He emphasized the enduring significance of Afghan journalists, both in exile and within the country, as they continue to document and report on the ongoing crises:

> *"This symposium is not just a space for reflection but for action. The collective knowledge and experiences we share here today will help us advance in protecting journalists' rights, advocating for press freedom in Afghanistan, and ensuring that the world hears the truth"*



Following Obaidi's opening remarks, **Naseer Ahmad Faiq**, Afghanistan's Representative to the United Nations, delivered the keynote address, **"Resilience and Advocacy Efforts to Keep Afghanistan Alive on the Global Agenda."** His speech set the tone for the event, offering a comprehensive analysis

of the current state of Afghanistan and the crucial role of global advocacy in sustaining the country's issues on the international agenda.

> *"The Taliban's repression of media freedom is not just an affront to the press but a direct attack on Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage and Islamic values."*

As the representative of Afghanistan at the United Nations, Faiq's perspective carried significant weight, combining both diplomatic insight and firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by Afghan journalists and the wider media landscape. He outlined the dire conditions faced by journalists in Afghanistan, particularly under the Taliban's repressive regime. Fayeq noted that approximately 43% of media outlets have shut down, and the vast majority of female journalists have been displaced from the workforce. He emphasized the need for continued international advocacy:



Freshta Hemmati, **CEO** of AJSO, delivered a compelling address that not only highlighted the organization's unwavering dedication to supporting Afghan journalists but also provided an insightful overview of AJSO's journey and its impactful projects. She chronicled the evolution of AJSO, from its inception to its current initiatives aimed at empowering journalists within Afghanistan and those in exile. Freshta shed light on the organization's multifaceted approach, which includes advocacy, capacity-building, and fostering global awareness about the challenges facing Afghan journalism.

She reaffirmed AJSO's mission to safeguard press freedom and emphasized the critical importance of keeping Afghanistan's narrative alive on the international stage:

> *"Afghanistan's narrative must not fade into silence. The AJSO team is actively working to maintain global awareness of Afghan journalists' fight for freedom of speech within Afghanistan, transforming attention into action, and action into meaningful change."*

First Panel: The Role of Media in Conflict Zones & Reporting on Afghanistan

The first panel of the symposium was moderated by **Hafizullah Marouf**, a journalist with the BBC World Service. This session focused on the role of media in conflict zones, with particular attention to Afghanistan's media landscape under Taliban control. Panelists included **Parwiz Kawa** (Hasht-e-Subh Daily), **Harun Najafizada** (Afghanistan International), and **Dr. Anja Wollenberg** (MiCT).



1st panel of the sympoisum, Parwiz Kawa talking to the public

Parwiz Kawa shared his firsthand experience of the immense challenges faced by Afghan journalists, particularly after the Taliban's return to power. He emphasized the significant barriers to information access, noting how the repression of women's rights has led to the near-total exclusion of women from journalism. Despite these obstacles, Kawa stressed the importance of Afghan journalists persevering in their work, highlighting that their role is crucial in documenting the ongoing crisis. He urged that, even in the face of adversity, journalists must continue to report, keeping in mind the need to preserve Afghanistan's history for future generations.

> *"We should deal with facts in a way that considers not only the people of today but also someone who will live years after us. We must tell the next generation what was happening during this specific time"*

Through Kawa's words, the panel reinforced the message that despite overwhelming odds, Afghan journalists must remain steadfast in their pursuit of truth, preserving the integrity of their profession for the future while fighting for the rights of those silenced by the regime. His call was clear: the responsibility to report and document the history of Afghanistan must not be abandoned, no matter the challenges ahead.

Harun Najafizada emphasized the role of citizen journalism in reporting from conflict zones, arguing that citizen-driven media, combined with professional journalistic ethics, can help provide essential

coverage of events that are otherwise hidden or suppressed. Najafizada spoke on the need for Afghan journalists to maintain professionalism in the face of escalating censorship:



> *"Whatever restrictions the Taliban impose on me—I don't buy it. As long as we adhere to our editorial guidelines to tell the truth, we will continue our work"*

The Taliban has implemented strict surveillance measures, making it dangerous for both journalists and community members to share information.

Harun Najafiada, Founder and Executive Editor of **Afghanistan International,** emphasized the importance of **professional networks** to ensure accuracy and maintain journalistic standards. Even under oppressive conditions, it is the responsibility of journalists to counter misinformation and provide an honest portrayal of the situation in Afghanistan. Najafizada also highlighted the importance of **local communities** in shaping Afghan media's coverage. Their firsthand accounts offer invaluable perspectives on the realities of life under Taliban rule, providing context often missing from broader media coverage.

> *"Observing the de facto government, what they are doing, and being critical about that is the responsibility of journalists outside the country, no matter that media inside the country cannot"*

Dr. Anja Wollenberg, the Founder and Head of Research at **Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT)** spoke about the responsibilities of journalists outside of Afghanistan, stressing the importance of exiled journalists in holding the Taliban accountable. She pointed out that while journalists inside Afghanistan face significant dangers, those in exile must continue their work, observing the de facto government and providing critical reporting.

Second Panel: Global Media's Role in Covering Afghanistan's Crisis

Moderated by **Mursal Wardak**, a member of international affairs committee of AJSO and a researcher at the Free University of Berlin focused on peace journalism, the panel featured contributions **Astrid Coyne-Jensen** (IMS), **Dr. Hazrat Bahar** (AJSO and Leipzig University), **Zahra Joya** (Rukhshana Media), and **MJ Daoud** (The What If project).



Dr. Hazrat Bahar, AJSO board member and researcher at **Leipzig University**, discussed the challenges faced by the large number of exiled Afghan media outlets. He pointed out that many of these outlets have increasingly shifted towards a business model, which compromises their journalistic integrity. Dr. Bahar suggested that Afghan media in exile must reconsider their approach, reducing the number of outlets and focusing on the core issues, to maintain their impact and credibility.

Astrid Coyne-Jensen, Program Manager at **International Media Support (IMS)**, built on Dr. Hazrat Bahar's concerns regarding the overwhelming number of Afghan exiled media outlets and their struggle to secure sustainable funding. She pointed out that international media often shifts its focus to new conflicts or trends, leaving exiled media outlets vulnerable to the loss of financial support as global attention fades. Coyne-Jensen stressed the importance of these outlets seeking alternative funding sources and developing self-sustaining models, rather than relying solely on external support.

MJ Daoud, founder of **The What If**, then highlighted the difficulty in addressing Afghanistan's core issues, explaining that the lack of focus on key topics makes it harder to gain international support. Without a clear direction, it becomes more challenging to mobilize global attention and effectively advocate for Afghanistan's needs.

Zahra Joya, founder of **Rukhshana Media**, also addressed the issue of restricted access to information, emphasizing how the Taliban's censorship severely limits the ability to report freely, both within Afghanistan and for journalists in exile. Together, their insights underscored the critical need for more reliable information, a clear focus, and global attention to raise awareness about Afghanistan's ongoing crisis.



Workshops and Collaborative Discussions:

- **Accessing and Reporting Information in Afghanistan: Developing Strategies for Gathering Reliable Information in a Heavily Censored Environment**

  This workshop focused on finding ways for journalists to gather accurate information in Afghanistan under Taliban censorship. Strategies included using secure digital platforms, collaborating with local sources, and leveraging citizen journalism to ensure reporting remains reliable despite restrictions.

- **Support Mechanisms for Afghan Exile Media: Building Sustainable Networks and Frameworks to Support Afghan Exile Media and Maintain Its Impact**

  The discussion centered on how Afghan exile media can build sustainable networks to ensure long-term survival. Participants explored ways to reduce dependency on external funding, form international partnerships, and create a coalition of Afghan media outlets to amplify their collective voice.

- **Implementing Symposium Recommendations: Translating the Discussions into Actionable Steps for Real-World Change**

  This session focused on turning the symposium's recommendations into concrete actions. Attendees identified key initiatives, such as advocacy campaigns and working with global organizations, to ensure Afghan media remains visible and supported in the international arena.

- **Developing Ethical Guidelines for Exiled Journalists: AJSO's Commitment to Drafting Ethical Guidelines Tailored Specifically for Afghan Journalists Working in Exile**

  The workshop addressed the need for ethical guidelines for journalists in exile. AJSO committed to drafting a set of standards to help Afghan journalists maintain their integrity and professionalism, ensuring their reporting remains credible and ethical despite external pressures.

Conclusion: Opening Doors for Action

The symposium concluded with a powerful demonstration of **AJSO**'s success in bringing Afghanistan's media challenges to the global stage. Despite the time constraints, the event was a catalyst for opening new avenues for international advocacy and support for Afghan journalists. Through a series of panels and workshops, AJSO not only highlighted the urgency of supporting Afghan media but also gathered a set of concrete solutions aimed at ensuring Afghanistan's media presence remains strong and impactful.

One of the key outcomes of the symposium was **AJSO**'s commitment to developing ethical guidelines specifically designed for Afghan journalists working in exile. These guidelines aim to help journalists navigate the challenges of reporting under difficult conditions, ensuring that they maintain high standards of integrity and professionalism even while operating outside their home country. The guidelines will serve as a crucial reference point, offering practical advice on ethical decision-making, accuracy, and accountability in their work, which is essential in preserving the credibility and reliability of Afghan media outlets in exile.



Call to Action: Shaping the Future of Afghan Journalism

The event wrapped up just as **Hamid Obaidi** mentioned in his opening speech:

> *"This symposium is not just a space for reflection but for action. The collective knowledge and experiences we share here today will help us advance in protecting journalists' rights, advocating for press freedom in Afghanistan, and ensuring that the world continues to hear the truth. Let us take this opportunity to build stronger collaborations, create new avenues of support, and ensure that Afghan voices continue to be heard globally"*

As the symposium drew to a close, it left participants with a clear and urgent call to action. AJSO extended an open invitation to partners, stakeholders, and advocates to join hands in shaping the future

of Afghan journalism. This collaboration is vital for driving meaningful change and ensuring the sustainability of media outlets that serve as the backbone of truth and accountability.

Key avenues for partnership include:

- **Working Towards Positive Change:** Support efforts to reform and strengthen Afghanistan's journalism system in both local and exiled contexts.
- **Building Global Connections:** Facilitate AJSO's engagement with foreign stakeholders to amplify the reach and impact of its mission.
- **Funding for Sustainability:** Assist in securing funding opportunities that enable Afghan media to remain independent and resilient.
- **Expanding Global Collaboration:** Partner with AJSO to evolve its international network, ensuring Afghan voices are represented on the global stage.

The symposium underscored that collaboration is not just a possibility but a necessity. AJSO's mission, fueled by the dedication of its volunteer members, remains steadfast: to advocate for Afghan journalists and ensure their stories are heard worldwide. This call to action invites everyone invested in press freedom to stand with AJSO and contribute to a brighter, more secure future for journalism in and about Afghanistan.

The event was captured through the lens of **Ahmadshah Azimi,** AJSO board member whose work provided a vivid depiction of the symposium's energy and engagement.