



# Crossfire in Kandahar

*Afghanistan's new journalists navigate an ambiguous war*

BY VANESSA M. GEZARI

One hot night in September, less than a week after Afghanistan's parliamentary election, soldiers from NATO's International Security Assistance Force arrived at the Kandahar home of Mohammad Nader. Nader, a cameraman for the Qatar-based satellite channel Al Jazeera, was sleeping shirtless on the floor near his front door. The door stood ajar so a breeze could blow in. He heard nothing until two soldiers grabbed him and pulled him out

into the courtyard. More soldiers waited there, he couldn't tell how many. They made him kneel while they bound his hands behind his back, then stood him upright. A soldier punched him squarely in the chest and kept his fist on Nader's heart. Nader had seen them do this to other detainees, and guessed that the soldier was checking his heart rate. They took his picture and showed him photographs of some men, asking if he knew them. Nader said he didn't.

He tried to explain that he was a journalist. His mouth was dry, and he had difficulty forming the words. His press card, issued by NATO's public affairs office, was in the pocket of his tunic just inside the door. The soldiers seemed surprised. They led him back into the house and studied the card. "It's no problem," Nader says he told them. "You can call me in the morning. I will come whenever you want." The soldiers picked up the tunic, which Nader had shed while he slept, and pulled it roughly over his shoulders, the sleeves hanging loose

over his bound arms. They thrust a hood over his eyes and led him out his front gate, breaking the lock as they went.

NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which is fighting the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, is comprised of more than 130,000 troops from forty-eight countries. Most of those troops are American, and although Nader was too rattled to notice the flags affixed to their upper arms, he believes that American soldiers burst into his house that night. He was arrested for allegedly acting as a Taliban propagandist. Two days earlier, NATO had detained another Al Jazeera journalist, Rahmatullah Nekzad, on the same grounds.

Nader told me about the arrest when I visited his home in the upscale Kandahar housing development of Aynomina a few weeks after his release. Our driver guided the car along evenly paved streets between modern high-walled compounds. Aynomina is the best neighborhood in the city, and Nader told us that he had bought a plot of land here years earlier when it was cheap and slowly built a modest house for his family. Like almost every other glimmering thing in the new Afghanistan, though, Aynomina carries a taint. The brainchild of Mahmoud Karzai, President Hamid Karzai's older brother, it was built with millions in U.S. government loans on land allegedly grabbed from the Afghan Army. Mahmoud Karzai, whose dubious investments were implicated in the near-collapse of Kabul Bank earlier this year, is the subject of a federal corruption probe in New York.

We pulled up outside Nader's house. He opened the front gate for us. His sixteen-month-old son, Rashad, clung to his leg, while his four-year-old daughter, Sumaiya—in ruffled blue jeans, her hair short as a boy's—stared boldly at me. As we walked toward the house, Nader pointed to scrapes on the interior wall of the courtyard, where he said the soldiers had leaned the ladder they used to climb into his compound in the early morning darkness.

I had come to Aynomina to try to understand what it is like for an Afghan journalist to work in his country today, but just figuring out what had happened to Nader and why turned out to be an object lesson in the complexity of the enterprise. The shifting layers of half- and quarter-truth that emerged were typical of what reporters, both Afghan and foreign, find here, and in some instances, the basic facts of the case eluded me. I was used to this. Afghanistan had schooled me in the limits of certainty. I had come of age as a reporter there in the

aftermath of September 11, when foreign journalists flooded in to describe a country so isolated by war and repression that every revealed detail resounded with the cymbal's clash of a major discovery. In the silence that inevitably followed, a fragment from a John Ashbery poem kept ringing in my ears: "Was it information?" Or did the stories that Afghans told fall into some other, more nebulous category?

My mind's flight to poetry was not, as it turned out, incidental. Then and now, divining meaning is not a passive experience in Afghanistan. Like reading, it requires energy and imagination. Nader's arrest was a small event in a big war. No one was seriously injured. But the incident speaks volumes about the difficulties that all journalists encounter in a place where facts are easily manipulated and infinitely open to interpretation.

The mutability of "information" in Afghanistan has been among the most crippling challenges of the war for the U.S. and its allies. As one American military intelligence analyst recently told me: "Collecting intelligence is a nightmare in this terrain." Indeed, the skills required to gather reliable information in Afghanistan are the skills of a journalist—a storyteller and a story-reader—not those of an intelligence analyst, whose compartmentalized existence often prevents him from discerning any broad narrative, let alone interpreting it. I am not the first to suggest a connection between journalism and intelligence gathering in Afghanistan. Last winter, then-NATO intelligence chief Major General Michael Flynn wrote that fixing intelligence would require teams of analysts who are "empowered to move between field elements, much like journalists," gathering detailed, ground-level information. Flynn co-authored the report with Matt Pottinger, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter then serving as a Marine captain. A footnote suggests that "seasoned print journalists who have been laid off in the current industry retrenchment, and who want to serve their country in Afghanistan, might be a source of talent that the State Department or other agencies could consider hiring."

For Afghan journalists, the methodological similarity between reporting and intelligence work is problematic. Journalism has little institutional standing in Afghanistan, and many Afghan reporters told me that ordinary people suspect journalists of spying. NATO's decision to arrest Nader—and the military's larger failure to understand the role of journalism in an open society—is the kind of act that encourages this confusion. It goes without saying that Afghan journalists should not be used by NATO or any other party to the conflict as primary intelligence sources, to be eavesdropped upon or interrogated in the hope of generating leads. But when Nader and Nekzad were detained, I had to wonder: Was NATO's lack of intelligence so complete—and its failure to dominate the information environment so frustrating—that forcibly questioning journalists had come to be viewed as a viable technique for both intelligence-gathering and getting the coalition's story told more favorably in the press?

For many Afghan reporters, the attraction of journalism lies as far as possible from these military and political aims. Afghanistan is an old country in the throes of sudden modernity, its people forced by international invasion and globaliza-

tion to undertake a radical form of time travel. Storytelling comes naturally here, and journalism feels both innate and modern. For young Afghans, especially in big cities, it is a pathway to union with the wider world, like cell phones or the Internet. Perhaps most important, Afghan reporters view journalism as a force for justice in a place where justice is rare. "As a young person in Afghanistan, I know I cannot help," my Afghan translator confided. "But we believe that if we join many drops, we can make a sea."

Journalism is burgeoning in Afghanistan for all these reasons. Under the Taliban, there were no private news organizations. Today, thirty-five TV stations, dozens of radio broadcasters, and hundreds of newspapers and magazines compete for Afghans' attention. Most receive at least some funding from the government, political parties, or international donors.

In recent years, the U.S. military has become more directly involved in funding Afghan media. In eastern Afghanistan last winter, an Army unit I spent time with was funneling tens of thousands of dollars to a local TV station, while maintaining

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that the station's editorial decisions were independent. The U.S. military routinely sets up local-language radio stations as part of its information operations campaign. The WikiLeaks release of military records last summer documented payouts to Afghan-run radio stations in return for airing content generated by U.S. military psychological operations teams.

The rapid growth of the media—and expanded funding from some quarters—have not made reporting in Afghanistan any easier. In fact, journalism has become more difficult as security has deteriorated. Political alliances have grown murkier under the weak Karzai government, deepening war has muddled the international community's intentions, and militant and organized crime networks have grown fat on foreign aid. Afghan journalists are relatively new to their work, and they have been criticized for lacking professionalism. But Afghan journalists describe the world they see: a complex place, littered with overlapping, conflicting accounts. There are no reliable sources here.

MOHAMMAD NADER IS ABOUT THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OLD, bearded, with a stocky build and blunt features. Born in Kandahar, he and his family left Afghanistan in 1985 to escape fighting between the Soviets and the Afghan mujahideen.



**Home safe** Mohammad Nader in the house where he was arrested, with his son Rashad.

He spent his adolescence in and around Quetta, Pakistan. His father died when he was three, so Nader's mother supported the family by working as a cook and cleaner. "There were no jobs for educated Afghani people," Nader told me. Once, an employer gave his mother 200 kilograms of flour to make bread for a wedding party. She kneaded dough all night, earning sixty Afghanis—a little more than \$1. Nader quit school to sell vegetables in the market. "Our great teachers were cleaners there," he said. "We were very happy when the coalition forces came."

In 2001, Nader and his family returned to Kandahar. "People were going places and taking pictures," Nader told me. "I like the camera and I can use the camera. These journalists were trying to be the first to take a picture. I like this—I wanted to take pictures before anyone else." He began working as a fixer for Al Jazeera's Arabic news channel. He spoke a bit of Arabic, but mainly he worked in his own language, Pashto, calling in reports. "We were giving correct and confirmed news, not making up news by ourselves," he said. A friend of Nader's worked for CNN, and he inspired Nader. When Al Jazeera closed its office in Kandahar, Nader stayed behind with a video camera to document the changing Afghan south.

In the days before I met with him, Nader had driven to

Arghandab, a restive agricultural district north of Kandahar, to film farmers harvesting pomegranates. It was high pomegranate season, and Arghandab is a key growing area, but Afghan and NATO military operations and threats from the Taliban and other armed groups were making farmers' lives difficult. While Nader was filming the farmers, an American patrol passed. He joined the soldiers and filmed them walking through the fields. Three days earlier, he told me, he had been driving through Kandahar when he saw some American soldiers talking to local people and shaking hands with kids they had met on the street. "I stopped to film it," he said. "Lots of the time, Americans are filmed with a gun, and under the gun's point, they have local people. I took that picture because I believed it expressed that there is not so much of a big gap. These people can work together, and this is the new strategy of Barack Obama." I asked if he was covering NATO activities more assiduously now than before his arrest. "I was doing that before and I'm also doing it now," Nader told me. "For me, the important thing is to get accurate, reliable sources due to the rules of journalism. I'm not a judge to decide who's doing good or who's doing bad."

On the night of his arrest, while Nader was out in the courtyard, soldiers searched his house. Nader's wife and their two children had been sleeping in one room, his elderly

mother and adult sister in another. Several Afghan interpreters in military uniforms led the women and children into a room with cushions along the walls, where the family serves tea to guests. “Don’t worry, sister,” one of the interpreters told Nader’s wife. “We are five Afghans with them. The others are infidels.” The interpreters carried the family Korans into the visiting room and gave them to the women, telling them: “Keep these Korans with you so the infidels won’t disrespect them.” The soldiers searched the rest of the house, collecting Nader’s camera equipment and clearing the family’s money from a safe. “They made a mess everywhere,” Nader’s mother told me, wiping away tears. “They took everything from the cupboards and the mattresses were all messed up.” Outside, before they put the hood over Nader’s head, the soldiers blindfolded him and muffled his ears. His sister, who has suffered for years from anxiety and depression, began to cry. The interpreters told her to be quiet, but she wailed even louder. “What are you doing with him?” Nader’s wife asked one of the interpreters. “It’s none of your business,” he told her.

The soldiers led Nader, blind and deaf, to a vehicle and put him inside. After a while, they stopped and brought him into a building. A female Afghan translator explained the rules of the prison: When the soldiers ask you to show your face, show it. When they ask you to hide your face, hide it. Don’t talk to other prisoners. When they took off his hood he saw that he was in a doctor’s office. A foreign doctor examined him. “Were you beaten in your house?” the doctor asked. Nader said he hadn’t been. The doctor said he would be visiting Nader regularly to provide whatever medicine he needed. Nader’s face was covered again and the soldiers led him to a detention room. After about fifteen minutes, a woman came in and greeted him, smiling. “She was very nice,” Nader told me. “The way she behaved, I thought she was a very kind woman.” She said she would begin his interrogation in five minutes.

The woman turned on a computer. She had Nader’s cell phone, and she started asking about the numbers in his contact list. She asked him about one number in particular. Nader said he didn’t recognize it. “I don’t know if this is Qari Yousuf’s number,” he said, mentioning the name of a Taliban spokesman in the south with whom he and other local journalists often spoke. “Give me the phone, I can recognize it by his name.” He had talked to Qari Yousuf Ahmadi the day before, as well as other Taliban contacts who he called when he couldn’t reach Ahmadi. “You talked to them?” the interrogator asked. “Yes, I talked with them according to the rule of journalism,” Nader says he told her.

He had made several calls to the Taliban the day before because a NATO helicopter had gone down and nine soldiers had been killed. The crash had occurred in Zabul, just north of Kandahar, and someone in Al Jazeera’s Kabul bureau called and told him to gather whatever details he could. Contacting the Taliban would have been an ordinary part of his reporting, along with talking to NATO and Afghan government spokespeople and residents in the area where the crash occurred. Nader knew that the Taliban often gave reporters inaccurate information, but he wasn’t overly troubled by

this. He was a cameraman, so words mattered less to him than images. At this point, he was just trying to establish what had happened and if the Taliban would take credit for downing the helicopter. “I of course called the Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousuf,” Nader told me. “Of course, we don’t call him a terrorist. We say, ‘Respected Qari’ or ‘Hajji Saab.’” The spokesman was in a bad mood that day, Nader recalled. He told Nader that the Taliban had shot down the helicopter and hung up.

The interrogator asked Nader about other numbers in his phone. She asked who his relatives were and where they worked. After a while, he was taken back to his cell. During the three nights he spent in detention, including the night of his arrest, Nader said he was questioned five times. When he told his interrogators that he had done nothing wrong, one of them suggested that maybe he had some enemies. Nader couldn’t remember anyone he’d fought with. One interrogator accused him of taking pictures of a NATO base and delivering them to the Taliban. “I’ve never done that, and I’m not going to do that,” Nader says he told the man. “If the Taliban are giving me \$10,000 for one second of film, I will never do that.” What if the Americans asked you to do something similar and give us the pictures? his interrogator asked. “If you give me \$20,000, I won’t do that for Americans either,” Nader told him, “because I’m a journalist, not a spy.”

His story reminded me of a related event. A few days before Nader’s arrest, members of Afghanistan’s intelli-

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gence service, the National Directorate of Security, or NDS, had detained a radio reporter from the northern province of Kapisa named Hojatullah Mujadadi. On September 24, NATO had issued a statement saying that Mujadadi had been released. But as late as mid-December, Reporters Without Borders said that he was still in Afghan custody.

Reporters Without Borders also alleged that before Mujadadi’s arrest, NDS officials had asked him to sign a contract saying he would supply them with information. “This form was called the ‘Cooperation Form’ and if I had filled it out, I would have become an NDS member in addition to being a journalist,” Mujadadi had told the advocacy group, which posted a recording of the conversation on its website. “I was supposed to spy for them.” I’d heard about this from other Afghan reporters, but an Afghan government official, who said he had looked into the case in an attempt to help Mujadadi, told me that NDS had evidence. A would-be insurgent had apparently implicated Mujadadi in a planned suicide attack. Reporters Without Borders disputes this.

“NDS tries to turn independent journalists into informers,” the advocacy group wrote in a statement. “It is disturbing that the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force accepts the use of such methods by NDS, its partner in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan.”

Listening to Nader, I was beginning to wonder if NATO wasn't in the same game. His interrogators, a man and a woman, finally asked what they should do with him. “I accept

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## Afghanistan is not a place where people simply say no.

you as a sister and him as a brother,” Nader says he told them. “We have a government in Afghanistan that's corrupt, but I accept your system. If I'm guilty, I accept that you will punish me. If I'm not guilty, let me go back to my kids and my journalist friends.”

Nader looked forward to the interrogations. His questioners seemed like good people, he told me, and the translators they worked with were particularly adept. The sessions also gave him an excuse to leave his cell, a dark room about ten feet long and eight feet wide. The cell disturbed him. Pictures occasionally appeared on the wall. Nader described them as photographs projected from somewhere else by means of a light beam or laser. One image showed a person with two broken legs. Later, a picture of a bloodstain appeared on the wall. Nader wondered if it was the blood of the prisoner who had occupied the cell before him. Another picture showed two dogs fighting. The stomach of one of the dogs was ripped open and puppies spilled out. Nader tried not to look at the images, lest he grow frightened. The doctor gave him sleeping pills, but he spent his three nights in NATO custody wide awake. Unfamiliar music played, and he could hear the voices of children calling, “Baba, baba!”—the Afghan word for father. He was convinced these were the voices of his own children, recorded somehow through his phone or another device the Americans had planted in his house.

I had never heard of prisoners being subjected to sounds or images like the ones Nader described, but I was unwilling to dismiss his account outright. In 2003, I had interviewed several Afghan men who had just been released from Guantánamo Bay. Along the way, they had spent time in U.S. military detention facilities in Bagram and Kandahar. They described being stripped naked and exposed to high-powered air conditioners that reduced them to shivering heaps on the floor. They spoke of being forced to listen to loud, frightening, and discordant music. Their accounts sounded outlandish to me at the time, and having no way to confirm them, I left the details out of my story. Later, when photos of the abuses at Abu Ghraib emerged, I realized I had been wrong. The mere fact that a detainee's experience sounded bizarre or

outrageous was no longer sufficient reason to believe that it had not happened.

AL JAZEERA'S KABUL BUREAU OCCUPIES A CANDY-COLORED, four-story mansion in Sherpur, a glitzy neighborhood of grand, ostentatiously decorated houses favored by former militia commanders and wealthy businessmen. The neighborhood's rutted dirt streets are guarded at regular intervals by armed men who do not work for the government. Looking up as we drove, I glimpsed dazzling blue glass windows and a mirrored balcony decorated with Arabic script. The Al Jazeera house had two giant satellite dishes on the roof. An armed guard opened the gate for us.

Samer Allawi, the bureau chief for Al Jazeera's Arabic channel, met me in the broad entry hall. On a TV set in his office, images of weeping Palestinian women marching in martyrdom headbands alternated with pictures of men harvesting fruit in Oman. Allawi's desk was clean but for a few papers, a computer, an apple, and a painting on glass that his daughter had made, which said in childlike Arabic script: “We love you, Dad.”

Allawi has been working for Al Jazeera's Arabic language channel in Kabul for five years, and has been bureau chief for the last four. Born in Palestine, he moved to Pakistan in 1986 and studied law. A decade later, he started working as a journalist in Islamabad for TV channels in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai. Al Jazeera's Arabic service shares the Kabul bureau with its sister channel, Al Jazeera English. Nader is a stringer with an exclusive contract. The other journalist detained by NATO, Rahmatullah Nekzad, is a freelance contributor to Al Jazeera who has also worked for The Associated Press.

Nader has never studied journalism. “He's originally not a professional journalist,” Allawi told me. But like so many others, he had learned on the job. Al Jazeera sent him for a week's training in Doha, mainly in how to use his camera, and he has attended follow-up sessions in Kabul. Additionally, Allawi told me that he talks constantly to his field reporters about how to handle sources and make ethical choices in sensitive situations. “Training in the field is very important,” Allawi told me. “It's more important than academic training in a classroom. When they get out of that classroom, they forget everything.” Despite his lack of training, Allawi said, Nader's access to sources on all sides of the conflict has made him invaluable.

Yet Allawi acknowledged that professional missteps had led to Nader and Nekzad's arrests. The day the men were released, ISAF's communication director, Navy Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, had visited Allawi and shown him transcripts of telephone conversations that had been recorded between the journalists and Taliban spokesmen. According to the transcripts, Nekzad was asked by an insurgent to hand over some film he'd made of Taliban attacks. Nekzad appeared to agree, or in any case, he didn't say no. In Nader's case, an insurgent spokesman had invited him to come and film the bodies of civilians killed in a NATO attack. Nader had told the man that he couldn't come to where the bodies were. But



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**‘Expect troubles’** During his detention, Nader says disturbing images and sounds were piped into his cell.

he said that if the Taliban brought the bodies to the city, he would film them there, and if they organized a demonstration, he would cover it.

Allawi told me that he had tried to convey to his staff that nothing should be staged for the camera. The accusation against Nader fell into this category. “It is very simple,” Allawi told me. “We should not agitate the people.”

The accusation against Nekzad was, in Allawi’s view, a tougher call. Nekzad lived in Ghazni, an insurgent-dominated central province. He had been detained by Afghan authorities in 2008 after he photographed the victims of a Taliban execution. According to the transcript Allawi saw, an insurgent spokesman had asked for Nekzad’s tape and Nekzad had appeared to agree, but it was unclear exactly what words he had used to indicate his agreement. Afghanistan is not a place where people simply say no. Language is not direct here, and outright refusal is one of the hardest things for Afghans to articulate. In the West, “no” means no, but in Afghanistan, “maybe” can mean no and “probably” can mean no. “If somebody calls me and wants sensitive pictures that I have, usually I do not say no from the beginning,” Allawi told me. “You say, ‘Why not? Let me discuss it.’” A reporter might say he would ask his boss, then tell his source, sorry, I’m not allowed. Everyone would understand.

As Allawi spoke, I realized what a rabbit hole NATO had gone down in trying to gauge the affiliations of Afghan journalists by listening to their telephone conversations. The subtle use of ingratiating language—the small words of encouragement or empathy that most reporters cannot help uttering as they listen to a source’s account of things, even when they disagree with what he’s saying—would look damning on a transcript. During his meeting with Allawi, Admiral Smith had accused the Al Jazeera reporters of being sympathetic to the Taliban, based in part on language the men used to address the insurgent spokesmen. The reporters sometimes addressed the insurgent they were speaking with as a “good mujahid,” using the Arabic word for a Muslim holy warrior. “For me, it’s a way of dialogue,” Allawi said. When he wanted to interview a diplomat, “I put the camera in front of him and say to him, ‘Your excellency,’ though he may not be excellent. We cannot tell the Taliban, ‘You are a criminal, I am coming to interview you!’ If I start with that bad language, how will he allow me to talk to him?”

After talking to Allawi, I wrote to my Afghan translator in Kandahar, relaying Allawi’s account of Nader’s offer to film the bodies and the demonstration. “Can you ask him to explain why he agreed to do that, and whether he thinks it was right or wrong?” A day later, my translator e-mailed

back: “He said, ‘I do work due to the principal of journalism.’” Nader had been remarkably open during my visit, but this was the Afghan version of “no comment.” I wasn’t surprised. If I’d been able to see him again in person, it would have been harder for him to dodge the question, but even then, I would have had no way of knowing for sure whether he was telling the truth. Maybe he sympathized with the Taliban, though nothing I’d heard from him or his colleagues suggested that. It seemed more likely that Nader, like every other Afghan I knew, led a circumscribed life. In a difficult place, certain compromises are necessary to avoid being killed. I had worked in Afghanistan long enough to know that some questions cannot be answered, at least not simply, not over e-mail, not in time for my deadline.

Allawi did not try to conceal Nader and Nekzad’s mistakes. But he was openly critical of the way in which they had been arrested. Both journalists were in regular contact with the Afghan government and NATO, he said. If NATO had asked them to come in and talk about their activities, they would have done so without complaint. In a country with

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## ‘Within ten years you want to create a community of journalism, a culture of journalism? It’s not easy.’

no functioning justice system, armed men at your house in the middle of the night could mean any number of things. “Is he a real soldier or a fake soldier?” Allawi said. “Is he from the security companies or the foreign troops? Is he a robber or coming officially from the agencies? You don’t know.” Nader’s mother had told me that she believed she would never see her son again. By Allawi’s count, it had taken forty-eight hours after Nekzad’s arrest and twenty-four hours after Nader’s to ascertain that the reporters were safe and in NATO custody.

A decade ago, Allawi noted, there had been no journalistic community in Afghanistan. “Within ten years you want to create a community of journalism, a culture of journalism? It’s not easy.” Much that has become common journalistic practice in Afghanistan would be unacceptable in the West. Afghan and Western journalists quote Taliban spokesmen whom they never meet face to face, whom they only know by phone numbers, whose voices and personalities change depending on when they are reached. During his years as a cameraman in Kandahar, Nader had sought to interview Qari Yousuf Ahmadi in person. “He wouldn’t meet me,” Nader said. Indeed, the names of the most frequently quoted Taliban spokesmen are widely believed to refer to groups of spokesmen rather than individuals. Journalists

film interviews with people claiming to be Taliban fighters, men with guns, their faces obscured by scarves. “If I see a person covering his face and he comes and says that, ‘Yes, I am the commander of Taliban, I’m the second person after Mullah Omar and I meet with Mr. Karzai,’ it’s not acceptable,” Allawi said. “But it could happen in this country. Believe it or not, that’s it. It’s up to you to believe it or not.” (Journalists are apparently not the only ones prone to such mistakes. Allawi and I spoke a month before a man speaking with NATO and Afghan officials and claiming to be a high-level Taliban negotiator was revealed as a fraud.)

In the end, Allawi seemed almost jolly about his relationship with the Americans. After Nader and Nekzad were released, both men had been summoned to Kabul, and Allawi counseled them. Then he threw a party in their honor, to which he invited Admiral Smith. “We have no problem with ISAF,” Allawi told me. He called the Karzai government “maybe one of the most tolerant governments in the third world with journalists.” Allawi was a realist. Taliban fighters had kidnapped him a year earlier and broken his rib with their rifle butts before letting him go. On other occasions, he had been insulted and interrogated by NATO soldiers. His camera equipment had been confiscated by the Afghan government. “This is the situation in Afghanistan,” Allawi told me. “If you are going to troubled areas, you expect troubles.”

Allawi had told me that because he was clean-shaven and wore Western clothes, he was sometimes mistaken for a communist when he reported in the Afghan countryside. He was also accustomed to being mistaken for a foreign agent. And he found it unremarkable that he and other journalists, as some of the few people who had regular contact with the Taliban, would be seen by international forces as viable sources of intelligence. “I’m aware that all my conversations with anybody is recorded for somebody else. And it’s not something secret in this country,” Allawi told me. “This is an intelligence war, and intelligence war has no limits.”

AFTER THREE NIGHTS IN DETENTION, NADER WAS CALLED out of his cell again. A soldier met him, cheerful and smiling. “I have good news,” he said. “You’re going to be released.”

The soldier beckoned to him: “Come here so I can show you some pictures.” Nader looked at the photos, taken at a copper mine in Logar Province south of Kabul. The soldier explained that the mine was being developed so that Afghanistan could export its minerals. “He said, ‘I’m showing you this because Afghan people always think that wherever there is an American base, they are stealing these things from Afghanistan. But we’re here to build this country, not to steal from you,’” Nader told me. And then Nader said something that made me wonder again about NATO’s intentions. He recalled that the American soldier said something like: “This is a picture so that you learn, and give this picture to other people also.” Nader wasn’t exactly being asked to distribute a picture or a video clip on behalf of the coalition. But he was being asked to tell a particular kind of story.

The soldier asked whether Nader thought the Americans

should stay in Afghanistan. “We don’t have a strong national army or police,” Nader told him. “When they are strong enough, the Americans can leave, but not now.” Nader suggested that the money the Americans spent on bombs might be better invested in construction projects that would create jobs for young people, so they wouldn’t be pressured to join the insurgency. “Next time you come to town, you can visit us in the Kandahar Press Club and we will prepare food for you, because you treated me well,” Nader said he told the soldier. “If I were in Afghan custody, I might have been beaten.”

When they let him go, they gave him back the equipment and Afghan currency they had taken from his house, along with 1,000 Afghans, about \$20, for taxi fare. Nader told me that about \$300 in U.S. currency and some of his wife’s wedding jewelry, which were stored in the safe with the money, disappeared and were not returned. He complained to the Kandahar governor’s office, and someone promised to look into it.

Admiral Smith was not available to speak with me about the detentions. Instead, I was invited to interview his second in command, Navy Captain Gary Paul Kirchner. We met in a coffee shop at ISAF headquarters, a leafy compound in central Kabul ringed by towering blast walls. Kirchner is an earnest, mild-mannered reservist with a background in video production. In civilian life, he is a strategic communications consultant with Booz Allen Hamilton, and he told me that his responsibilities at ISAF included “marketing.” He spoke optimistically about a roundtable that ISAF had hosted for Afghan journalists to discuss civilian casualties, and regular meetings over tea where Afghan journalists and NATO officials discussed the day’s top news.

I asked Kirchner to describe the Taliban’s media strategy. He laughed. “I would characterize it as fiction,” he said. “General Petraeus believes that we have to be the first with the truth, and that means that every time we do an operation, we write a press release on it.” ISAF has learned that if it doesn’t fill the early information void after an event, the Taliban will. And if ISAF’s message isn’t strong and clear enough—and usually it isn’t—the Taliban will win the day. “They have a very sophisticated operation,” Kirchner said of the Taliban media strategy. “They know what they’re doing.”

NATO officials routinely describe insurgent propaganda as “sophisticated,” but it isn’t the sophistication of the insurgents’ approach that makes it effective so much as its simplicity. There is such a thing as a good story, not in the moral sense, but in the sense that a story grips you and pulls you along, that it has a dramatic climax, that it paints good and evil in clear terms, that it satisfies some deep craving in the listener. The Taliban know how to tell a good story. NATO is stuck telling bad stories because it can’t tell outright lies. But it doesn’t tell any deeper truth, either.

“The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new,” the critic Walter Benjamin wrote in 1936. “It lives only at that moment. . . . A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.” One thing that makes Taliban press statements feel like stories is that they are set in the context of Afghan history and experience.

Trolling around an insurgent’s English-language website recently, I happened on a press release from November titled, “The occupying forces are the main factor behind the recent assault and all other adversities.” The ostensible topic was a joint U.S.-Russian drug raid near the Pakistani border in October that netted more than 2,000 pounds of opium and heroin. But the statement’s real purpose was to question U.S. aims in Afghanistan, and to connect them to those of the Russians in the 1980s. In doing so, the Taliban mined a rich vein of resentment among Afghans, many of whom fail to understand why any nation would send soldiers to another country unless they sought to conquer it. The critique fit neatly into a larger narrative that is already familiar to Afghans. “Some analysts are of the opinion that the intention behind the recent co-operation is that Russians want the Americans” to stay in Afghanistan, the release says, so that “American imperialism is also engraved in Afghanistan” the way Soviet imperialism was years ago.

ISAF press releases have none of this narrative flow. They rarely offer a coherent account of why something happened, or what it has to do with anything else. In some cases, NATO doesn’t know what happened. It takes time for details to travel from the battlefield to a public affairs officer, who can share them with reporters. Even when information is available, ISAF press releases are bland and official, and the Afghans featured in them, whether Taliban commanders or wounded civilians, remain opaque to the reader. Information is not the same as a story. But Kirchner stuck to his guns.

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## ‘This is an intelligence war, and intelligence war has no limits.’

“The truth, frankly, is our greatest weapon, and we use that,” he told me. “The truth.”

In the last couple of years, NATO has ramped up its information campaign against Taliban propaganda, and I’ve often wondered whether soldiers are actively hunting Taliban spokespeople. At first, Kirchner avoided the question. While allowing that Taliban spokesmen are legitimate targets, he said that, to his knowledge, most operations seek weapons facilitators, bomb makers, and insurgent commanders, not spokespeople. I pressed him. Why had NATO arrested the Al Jazeera journalists, whose loyalties might be dubious, when the alliance could have sought the insurgents the journalists were speaking to, who were clearly on the other side?

Kirchner seemed to hesitate slightly, as if he were about to give me some bad news and he wanted to let me down easy. “I would think that most of them are in Pakistan,” he said gently. “I mean, that is Gary’s personal opinion.”

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“Even though they’re reached by Afghan cell phone numbers?”

“I didn’t know that,” Kirchner said. There was an awkward silence. “I mean, I don’t focus on that. That’s really—in public affairs, in my domain—that’s not an area that we focus on.”

Kirchner declined to discuss the allegations against Nader and Nekzad, beyond saying that the men had “crossed the line of good journalism.” He kept calling the channel for which they worked “Al Jazeera.” “The outcome is that we’re communicating more with Al Jazeera,” Kirchner said. “I think what we’re trying to do is reach out to the Afghan media and insure that both sides of the story get told.”

“Reaching out” was not what the arrests had felt like to Nader and his fellow journalists in Kandahar. I reminded Kirchner that in the initial press releases about the detentions, Nader was not mentioned by name or described as a journalist, but identified only as a Taliban “facilitator” who was “responsible for collecting information relevant to the Taliban information campaign in Kandahar City.” Even the name “Al Jazeera” was nowhere to be found. After the men were questioned, Kirchner told me, it became clear that they didn’t pose a significant threat. But by then, the damage was done. “It happens,” Kirchner said. “We detain a lot of people.” He declined to comment on Nader’s account of the disturbing pictures projected on the wall of his cell, except to say that NATO forces abide by the Geneva Conventions and by detention rules laid down in a U.S. Army field manual.

Kirchner agreed that Afghan journalists need more training. But he also acknowledged an indigenous strength. Recently, he said, he had watched an episode of a TV program that the Afghan interior ministry had created to publicize its activities. “It was really good!” Kirchner told me. “They’re natural storytellers! The videography was first class. I mean, I didn’t understand a word that was being said, but I could follow the storyline. So I think there is a wonderful storytelling tradition here that I don’t think us Westerners appreciate. And I think that rather than us coming in and telling them, ‘This is how you do a news story,’ I think what we need to do is listen to them and maybe help them in terms of telling a story about something that has just happened, using their seemingly innate ability to be good storytellers. I guess what I’m saying—just harnessing it. That’s all that needs to happen.”

ON MY LAST DAY IN KANDAHAR, I VISITED THE LOCAL PRESS club in a shadowy, cavernous building across the street from a deserted park. In the park stood a large, gaily-colored Ferris wheel that, in all my visits to the city, I had never seen anyone ride. We climbed the stairs to the roof, which offered a view of the neighborhood, and waited in the office of Fazal Rehman, a correspondent for the Voice of America’s Pashto radio service and the press club’s president. After a short time, Rehman arrived. He was a middle-aged man with big hands, thick eyebrows, and a kind, tired face. He had started working for VOA in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province, where he had lived as a refugee during the Taliban era. He came to Kandahar after the regime fell in 2001.

“Journalism here is like sticking your hand between open power lines,” Rehman told me. “If you touch them, you will be shocked.” I told Rehman that I had always found Afghanistan an extraordinarily difficult place to pin down facts. He nodded. “We are facing the same problem,” he said. “It’s also very hard for us to find facts. The government people and administrators are very expert in telling lies to hide their mistakes.” I asked how this had happened. “Unfortunately,

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## NATO officials routinely describe insurgent propaganda as ‘sophisticated.’

I hate to say it, lying is part of the tradition now,” he told me. “Before, Afghanistan was not like this. It’s all these revolutions, very quickly, one after another—the communists, the mujahideen, the Taliban, and now this. After each one, lying was increased 10 percent. So after ten of them, it will be 100 percent.”

Instead of facts, Afghan journalists are generally forced to make do with one side’s word against the other. They would receive a statement from NATO saying that fifty Taliban had been killed, Rehman told me. The Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, would call to tell them that insurgents had destroyed four tanks and killed a large number of soldiers. “Journalists here know that both are wrong,” Rehman said. “But it’s easy to make that story, and the office also expects it.

“But there are thousands of stories—like this park here.” He gestured toward the window, which looked out on the park with the abandoned Ferris wheel. “Who built it? Why did they build it? And why is no one coming here to use it, but people are just sitting on the road? No one does these stories.”

I told him about a story I had been reporting for two years. It involved a brutal killing in southern Afghanistan. I had collected half a dozen coherent and conflicting accounts of why the killing had occurred. Much of what I’d been told was impossible to verify, and the crime scene was too dangerous for me to visit for any length of time without a military escort. Rehman smiled. “I will tell you a story,” he said. “Once, there was a mental hospital. All the mental patients were looking into a hole in the ground, and they didn’t see anything. Finally, a doctor came over and looked into the hole. ‘I don’t see anything,’ he told the patients. ‘How do you expect to?’ they asked. ‘We have been looking into this hole for years. You just got here.’” **CJR**

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