

Afghanistan Field Guide

UPDATED: 27th October 2021



On the Taliban's flag you will see the Islamic declaration of faith in Arabic which reads "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is his Messenger"

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Introduction

As we continue to work in Afghanistan under Taliban rule with media crews useful lessons are being learned.

This is a live document which will be updated after each team leaves and more intelligence is gathered on the ground. Please do send feedback and any notes you think I should add.

This is friendly advice to teams I have worked with to help you. It is not professional advice and you should make your own assessments.

Before deploying again contact the author for an updated version.

Thank you,

Adnan Sarwar
Security Manager
hello@adnansarwar.com

Getting prepared

Press accreditation

As of 11th October 2021 we found this procedure has changed.

Previously it was simply a case of sending Press card, Afghan visa, Passport, Headed letter from your employer over WhatsApp to Mr. Ahmadzai, no longer.

The Taliban have created a more robust digitally-led system which communicates with Afghanistan's embassies worldwide. Paper letters are issued for use at checkpoints and to prove your validity to work, each letter is now numbered and Taliban officials can call the number bottom right to verify you. Have your local producer make a voice note of what the letter says for Taliban soldiers you meet who cannot read.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs are insisting on Journalist Visas only, no Business, no Tourist. Those already in country with those may be allowed to continue, some have been refused. The old letter shown below on the left is still valid but the new one will be issued from now on. Make sure all teams apply for a Journalist Visa, initially valid for 30 days and extendable in country. Some renewals have also been refused. It is a new process, most officials are efficient and respect their procedures to the letter. Mistakes may not be tolerated.

All team must physically attend the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Wazir Akbar Khan Road in Kabul to have their passports, visa, press cards scanned and for their personal letter to be issued. Take headed letters and other documentation for ease. It's a good idea to hire your fixer/local producer before you arrive so they can attend ministries for you to ease the process.

Your headed letter should be similar to this...

To whom it may concern,

XXX Radio & Television is the umbrella organisation of the federally structured public broadcaster in XXX, comprising nine public radio and television stations and running over 60 programs. The XXX radio programs alone reach more than 35 million listeners in XXX every day.

XXX has reported from South Asia for XXX decades. Our correspondents cover the entire region including Afghanistan.

XXX XXX is working for us as a reporter/journalist for our South Asia news team in Afghanistan. XXX has been employed by us for XXX years..

Please feel free to contact me if any further clarification is required.

Yours sincerely

XXX

NAME (Job Title, Channel). “

Attach clear photos of—

1. Press card
2. Afghan visa
3. Passport

NOTE: Important, please arrange a letter for your security adviser too, as a PRODUCER. When travelling through checkpoints they may well check we are with the same company.

Other

Update your will. I always have a scheduled email which I cancel when I arrive back to the U.K. If I should die while away the email is automatically sent to a friend who receives instructions on where to find details on how he should handle my affairs so to not burden my family, he's paid for this service. Advise you set an email, leading to a safe location in your home country with detailed instructions on obtaining death certificates and passwords to close your social media accounts, transfer your bank accounts to family and so on.

Do you have insurance from your employer? If you're a freelancer look for insurance.

Entry into Afghanistan

Via Uzbekistan

Once you have landed in Tashkent.

1. Get Uzbek money in airport, there are cash machines you put dollars into and they give local currency, instructions in English, very easy. You can use dollars, at times.
2. Buy an Uzbek SIM card, cheap and takes around 20 minutes to set up, they'll show you how, make sure you buy a week's credit, you'll need it later in Afghanistan.

Leaving airport

Taxi costs \$3—do not pay more than \$5. You'll have a very short ride from the airport to the hotel.

Hotel

Overnight in Oscar Boutique Hotel, Tashkent. Good English speakers. Food places close by.

Leaving Tashkent

Hotel can organise taxi, you'll need local currency. Ask for TERMINAL 3.

1. Before leaving buy water and snacks at the airport. It's hot across the border and takes time. There is waiting.
2. Exchange around \$150 to Uzbek Som. There is a high chance you will be overcharged by taxis if there are no buses running.

Tashkent > Termez

Internal flight. After security they will bus you to the other terminal.

In Termez

Feel free to start call your security manager, SIM card will have enough data

Taxi costs 100,000 Uzbek Som to border from Termez Airport. Approximately 10 dollars. Don't be surprised if people want to share the ride.

No problem on leaving Uzbek side. Just show passport and scan bags. All European passports are fine. No British allowed.

Wait for bus, costs 5000 Uzbek Som, takes a few minutes. You'll be wanting water by now. Others may join you. Second check takes photo of passport. Then scan bags in next building. And show passport again. You'll reach the gate where you will likely see the Taliban. Call your security manager. Some can get into the building and guide you through. Make sure you show your copy of your press accreditation letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Getting into Afghanistan we have had to wait for over an hour while the Taliban finished their prayers. In the meantime team was hungry and thirsty waiting for passports to be stamped. Hopefully you'll have food and water.

Your Uzbek SIM card will still work well for some distance into Afghanistan, have your fixer bring an Afghan replacement which you can then use throughout the country, keep the Uzbek sim incase leaving via here.

Via Pakistan

Flights can be booked via Kam Air and at times with Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to Kabul.

Alternatively teams have entered and exited via road using the Torkham and Spin Boldak crossings. These routes do pose problems with banditry.

Via Iran

Mahan Air is running regular flights as Afghans head west for work. If teams feel comfortable travelling via Tehran, consider this.

Via Afghanistan

It is anticipated that Turkish Airlines will start operations soon which would help teams accessing Afghanistan.

Accommodation

Most journalists stay at the Serena. Lately it has become a potential target for ISIS-K. It is still secure but on entering and leaving be aware you may well be under surveillance by ISIS-K using local beggars with phones.

Advise you stay in a guesthouse, away from other journalists.

It is tempting to meet others to swap experience. This is safer done over a WhatsApp group or well planned meeting somewhere discreet.

If your management allows there are local options, staying with local fixers and producers. Appreciate these may be too adventurous for some.

Security concerns

ISIS/Daesh

ISIS/Daesh have attacked the Taliban and Shias, in mosques and on the streets. The recent bombing at the Eid Gah mosque on 3rd October 2021 in Kabul was a significant event. It occurred during the funeral prayers for the mother of Zabihullah Mujahid, the lead spokesperson. Given its importance it was given surprisingly little coverage in the west (the U.K. particularly) though it did appear in Europe. ISIS want headlines so if they cannot achieve them by killing Muslims they may turn their sights onto foreign journalists which would guarantee news coverage.

Road traffic accidents

Driving or being a passenger in Kabul can result in an accident through erratic driving or speeding. Nobody wears seatbelts. Your broadcaster may insist on wearing them. Either way this along with traveller's diarrhoea are likely your main concerns.

Taliban

You will find some Taliban soldiers with excellent training, For example they kept journalists away after the first Eid Gah explosion for fear of secondary devices. And you will also find soldiers with little training. It is possible to pass through the border at Uzbekistan without passing security. It is possible to pass into Kabul International Airport from the city without having your bags checked. It is also possible to take a flight to Kabul Airport and pass through into the city without having your cabin baggage checked.

Where security is good is Mazar-e-Sharif Airport where local well trained staff have been convinced to come back to work and deploy sniffer dogs and check every item of baggage.

Cash

Afghanistan is a broken country so systems which work in developed countries should not be expected nor relied on here. MoneyGram is currently working. Once the cash has entered the country the security team should take responsibility for it. Finding safe places to keep it. And paying for all drivers, fixers, food, water so the correspondent can concentrate on their jobs without this extra responsibility.

Some broadcasters wait to pay fixers and drivers at the end, say after a week or two. This is inadvisable, aside from being bad manners, it is best to keep a crew motivated to work for you. Money influences. If you don't pay and another crew do, you may find your fixer disappears, Worse they may take money from a violent group for information on your whereabouts. Keep them paid and motivated daily.

If bringing in more than say \$10,000 it's advisable to have security team meet correspondent in say Dubai or Islamabad to split cash before entry.

Working with the Taliban

Soldiers

The majority of Taliban soldiers you will meet will be friendly and professional. You're likely to meet them at checkpoints on the road, entrances to official buildings and less likely they may chat to you on the street. You can meet Taliban soldiers who are uncooperative and some who are dangerous. If in doubt be deferential, polite and leave. Make sure when asked you have your press accreditation letter issued by the IEA (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) copies can be problematic so print the best quality until you can go to the office in Kabul to pick up your original. Also carry your press card and passport with Afghan visa.

The Taliban, again the majority, are anti-corruption. Do not attempt to bribe them. What is welcome is mobile telephone credit. Like all soldiers they are bored on the checkpoints and want to get online. They asked our fixer for this at times. They are also anti narcotics, do not engage in any drug or alcohol use, if caught this will result in going to jail. Not ideal.

Once trying to gain access to Kabul's Main Police Station the guard was angry with us and no amount of negotiation nor talking to his superiors was helping. In this case we left. Opposed to this experience on the border crossings we built familiarity, they'd recognise us and let us travel freely.

Respect

Don't be on your phone when with officials. If you need to note something use a notebook and pen. If it's an important email, excuse yourself. At this moment you don't want to create the impression you do not respect them.

Remember your role. To access a story. Some journalists are not creating a good working environment for others who come in the future. Your role is not to upstage a Taliban official because you disagree with the government personally, unless it's an interview where they know you'll ask them hard questions. Most Taliban members are happy to engage reporters as long as rules are followed.

One problem at a time

Systems are not running well, don't overwhelm officials new to the job by asking them to do a series of tasks. Better to get one done with one and move to next one. This may seem time consuming at first but it works better than confusing officials who at times don't have the full training to do their work. We met a former law lecturer who was now working in the ministry of finance, for example.

Stop and search

I have personally been arrested and stopped and searched twice and each episode has ended in the Taliban being apologetic after seeing all the correct paperwork and checking my passport. Please do not panic. Be courteous. If you are alone, offer to call your fixer who can negotiate with them in the local language. Don't offer bribes.

Make friends not enemies

It can be easy to become frustrated in Afghanistan for people not used to stress. Allow your security manager to deal with difficult conversations. Always be polite. For security managers, please remove from your thinking that you are here to fight. You are here to facilitate. Fight when you need, first look for deescalation.

Levels

Some Taliban soldiers you meet may well be the villagers some expect, others are sophisticated, well-educated and can see through nonsense. I've had experiences ranging from saying Hello in a heavy British almost comical manner and being waved through by bemused soldiers, to being asked to leave a vehicle and questioned diligently and searched well, including my mobile phone. Don't play games, don't condescend. If you need help, ask for it, they'll prefer that to being mocked or played.

On the ground

WhatsApp Groups

WhatsApp works well in country, the Taliban rely on it so we don't believe it will be cut off. Other apps should be used too, Facebook has had outages in service. Signal is advised.

A good way of working could be an editorial group where the correspondent communicates with their team, and a security group to discuss safety, logistics, money and lessons learned. This allows the correspondent to concentrate on their work.

Advise you download all WhatsApp chats before closing groups, for future reference.

Benefits of diverse teams

Building a team with both women and men and white and brown allows a broadcaster to access varied stories. There is still a deference to white crews at times, but as the Taliban become more confident they are turning these people away too. Being a brown male is an obvious advantage—use it. Being a brown female is too, one correspondent was able to talk to other females with ease. If there was no need for the security adviser to be in the room, they left. It is far more useful for them to be outside collecting useful intelligence and planning exit routes than inside a safe room likely hindering a conversation.

Security managers

The Taliban are not happy seeing people with tattoos as they are haram (forbidden). Ex military personnel dress and move in a manner which makes them noticeable. The Taliban have not only been fighting Western forces for 20 years they've also been observing them using binoculars, they know the mannerisms of a soldier. It would be wise to ask ex military personnel to tone down their clothing or wear local attire. Long sleeves to hide tattoos. Or hire those who aren't so obviously former soldiers.

Security advisers should be told their role is one of diplomacy first. And to learn at least the basics in Pashto & Dari—saying hello, goodbye, thank you go a long way.

Personal phone, local phone

At times you may well be searched. Are there photos on your phone that may embarrass? Contacts you don't want to hand over? Safer to have two phones. A local smartphone can cost around \$50, and a local SIM card can be loaded with data.

Fixers/local producers

The price for fixers ranged wildly. One team were paying \$800 per day to one who didn't turn up at times, another found one for \$100 but he wasn't great. Ours was \$350, we got results but he was learning his role and not as proactive as we would have liked. The prices are erratic since big news crews buy up the good ones who are left, many escaped.

Expect to be charged different prices for experience and for people scared to work for western crews. If you can guarantee a length of time you can negotiate a better rate, we saved money by not using a fixer and driver on the day our correspondent was doing lives from her property.

Pay fixers. One correspondent used a fixer for a whole day and then said his (large well-funded) newspaper did not have any money, though they had managed to send him to the country for several months. This caused ill feeling and many other correspondents stopped helping the staffer. Don't play this game. Sending seemingly liberal reporters to a poor broken country and then ripping off locals is not a headline you want.

Prior preparation

It is useful to hire a trusted fixer before the team lands. They can buy SIM cards and start working on stories making the team's time on the ground more efficient. This relies on recommendations for other news crews. As above rates and quality of fixers varies.

Cultural notes

Languages

It is disappointing that after twenty years of western militaries in Afghanistan there still are not great Pashto and Dari phrasebooks to buy in say London. Pimsleur offer audio courses in both. These can be bought cheap using an Audible subscription. Please learn how to say the basics in both languages, yes you have a fixer but even a simple phrase such as “Zama Garana Wo Rorah Manana”, which means “My dear brother, thank you” goes a very long way with the Taliban.

Women

Please be respectful of women and don't approach them unless invited to do so. There may well be incidences such as professional environments where you may meet a female doctor who engages you in conversation. Fine. But on the whole it is not a good idea to chat to women in the street. Interviewing someone through a fixer/ local producer is fine.

Social media

Correspondents will want to post their stories. If they are doing lives from a rooftop it may add to the risk by them posting across other networks too. If the enemy didn't see the live but then saw the social media does it increased the risk by adding more ways of being discovered?

Be aware of users on social media posting news about the country. Several prominent activists are posting constant negative news which does not match the facts on the ground. For them it's political, for you it's about following good intelligence.

Have set up a WhatsApp group called **AfgSecNet** for **security advisers only** to share real knowledge. It is a tool for us to stay safe, use it. We are working for competitors but we can all help each other. Please don't invite correspondents. We will want to discuss personal matters. Email for an invite, above.

If there is interest in a journalist's group can set one up.

Remember, any platform which allows users to send in their reports such as Ehtesab is open to abuse by ISIS-K too.

Communications

At times provided trackers didn't work. It's good not to rely on solely one system, so we also had apps—Life360, and WhatsApp with live location.

Look for a multi-system solution. Trackers, sat phones, apps like SMART 24 and Life360.

At times nothing will work. The road moves from Kabul to Bamyan and Mazar-e-Sharif to Hairatan proved to be communication black spots. Overwatch based in Europe or the US should take note and not panic. Team on the ground should endeavour to stay communicating. At two points it was possible to send an email using the tracker.

We have tried three different SIM cards landing on one that was reliable. This was Afghan Wireless (AWCC). You will see Afghans carry two or three mobile phones using sims from different networks so they don't lose reception. Future teams could buy cheap phones for around \$20 in which to keep an alternative network's sim.

Walkie talkies are a cheap tool to keep communicating between vehicles.

Female security

On a previous assignment, our female correspondent felt uncomfortable in a crowded market place where there were a majority of men. She asked to leave and we removed her from the situation into a nearby vehicle and with a security adviser.

On long road moves our security advisers carried shawls and could construct a temporary private space for females to change clothing or be private. Extendable poles would also be useful. Shawls are versatile and can transform western style clothing into modest clothing when viewed through a car window at checkpoints.

There are a range of security practices from different media organisations here, from newspaper journalists who go alone, to remote overwatch to full in person. Single female correspondents have reported feeling unsafe. Would they report that to an overwatch in London? Fearing their managers wouldn't think them tough enough to do their job? And if they did report it, what could someone in an office miles away do? Much better to have a security adviser to confide in.

Security costs money but it takes that to make sure people feel comfortable and safe enough to do their work.

Would not recommend sending single female nor male reporters without security. It's irresponsible.

Medical

Malaria

Prevalent across populated areas on Afghanistan.



Low to no risk
antimalarials not usually advised

High risk
antimalarials usually advised

Surrounding countries with malaria risk

This map is only intended as a guide and is not exact. The map must always be used in conjunction with the malaria advice text. Bite avoidance measures should be taken in all areas.

Click on an icon below for additional country information

Regional Information



Major Airports



Map reference: <https://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/destinations/asia-central/afghanistan/afghanistan-malaria-map>

Avoid being bitten by using insecticides and nets. Anti-malarials may be advised in high risk areas.

More advice here: <https://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/advice/malaria>

Traveller's diarrhoea

This is common. Carry oral rehydration sachets to replace salts, paracetamol for the cramps and antibiotics (Azithromycin) if symptoms don't clear up. Note, do not use Ciprofloxacin, it has been phased out due to resistance built against it. It will be cycled back in in years. Please follow latest medical advice and use Azithromycin. Nobody cares that you still have your Iraq Cipro.

Vaccinations

See here: <https://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/destinations/asia-central/afghanistan#Vaccinations>

Local medicines

These are likely to be safe for use if from Pakistan and India, who make surgical equipment and most of the Covid vaccines for the UK, respectively.

Trauma hospitals

Afghanistan unfortunately has a great deal of experience with trauma injuries. The Italian charity Emergency Hospitals based across the country are excellent. Head there for blast and bullet injuries.

PCR tests

Widely available in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif, ranging from \$30 to \$100 for a home visit and results within 3 hours.

Security advisers with medical training

I'm only familiar with UK qualifications. Look for advisers with FREC 3/MIRA and if they have Advanced Medicine from WMT they can carry anaesthetics. Pentrox and Tramadol recommended. Being involved in an RTA causing injuries between Kabul and Jalalabad will require immediate pain relief and long term until the team can reach a primary care facility.

Exiting Afghanistan

British passport holders have been stopped leaving via Uzbekistan. As have some Europeans. It's believed this may be due to the UK Government discovering some evacuees were on terror watch lists and also so Afghans cannot ask for British help from Tashkent. Think of that what you will.

Kam Air likely to restart the Kabul to Islamabad from November 2021 for around \$5-600. There are flights now but they're full. So they're announcing the next lot end of the month.

Kam Air are running flights from Kabul to Abu Dhabi every Wednesday \$1500 only for residents of Dubai.

Final thoughts

We may well see Chinese airliners land in Kabul. Afghanistan's neighbours are forming strong, pragmatic relations with it, including Pakistan (security), Iran (strategic), Uzbekistan (energy) and China (infrastructure and mining). Further, Russia is also offering aid.

If the Taliban can stop the brain drain to the west of scared educated liberals and those taking advantage of the mercy flights and exits they could well form a better government that reconnects it with its previous suppliers of cash, and diplomatic relations further than its borders.

That said, the opposite could happen, we met enough liberal people who opposed Taliban rule and wanted it to fail, plenty of examples of oppression which wanted a release, along with the Haqqani network wanting more power in government causing a rift and ISIS-K believing they represent a purer version of a Sharia-based system which they will advance through suicide bombings and targeted killings, we may see a Taliban government fighting to keep control through more extreme violence, keeping the international community out.

Winter is coming. If aid does not reach the population, will we see civilians fighting?

Either way, news crews deploying here should expect a spectrum of experiences from feeling safe eating out to being targeted by ISIS-K.

Suggested kit list

Clothing

Try to avoid wearing Western clothing. It is cheap and sensible to have a tailor produce local clothing for you. This allows you to not present as a media crew when your kit is away and keep you safer. It will also make it easier for you to travel by buying clothes in country and then disposing of them here before leaving. In winter you may want to wear leggings and vests under your clothing.

For women these can cost around \$40, for men these cost around \$20. For both cloth and tailoring. Your fixer/local producer can find a place for you, avoid Shahr-e-Naw, seen as a business area with inflated prices.

For footwear advise you wear tough trainers. If you are caught in an explosion it won't be pleasant walking through glass and debris with sandals.

Medical kits

Please be very prepared for traveller's diarrhoea. Carry oral rehydration sachets to replace salts, paracetamol for the cramps and antibiotics (Azithromycin) if symptoms don't clear up.

Carry anti malarials and nets. Prevention is better than the cure.

Anaesthetics. If you are allowed to carry them. British security managers with the Advanced Medicine qualification from Wilderness Medical Training can order Pentrox for short term pain relief and Tramadol for long term pain management.

Trauma kits should be carried by all, tourniquets, field dressings, chest seals, hemostatic agent (eg. Celox), bandages, gloves x 3, nasal pharyngeal airway, scissors, torch. Unwrapped please. Not still in its packaging to save money by hoping to return it. Also have the security manager train or refresh people in the use of all items. It is little use if the only person who knows how to use the kit is the security manager and they become a casualty.

Don't forget painkillers and plasters. Common injuries, be prepared for them.

Technology

Kabul is not the war zone you may be expecting. Bring power adapters. But you can buy most technology here from USB keys to external mics for your camera to voice recorders to lenses to laptops. Do bring your own.

ENDS