

FOREIGN POLICY
REPORT

The Taliban Detained Me for Doing My Job. I Can Never Go Back.

FP's columnist on a harrowing return to Kabul, almost one year after the United States left Afghanistan.

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By Lynne O'Donnell, a columnist at Foreign Policy and an Australian journalist and author.

I returned to Afghanistan this week, almost one year after the withdrawal of the U.S. military cleared the way for the Taliban's victory. I wanted to see for myself what had become of the country since I flew out of Kabul on Aug. 15, 2021, hours before the Islamists began what many residents now refer to as a "reign of terror."

I was in the north of Afghanistan when the United States invaded in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in Kabul when the Taliban returned 20 years later. In between, I spent many years as a resident correspondent.

I left Afghanistan today after three days of cat-and-mouse with Taliban intelligence agents, who detained, abused, and threatened me and forced me to issue a barely literate retraction of reports they said had broken their laws and offended Afghan culture. If I did not, they said, they'd send me to jail. At one point, they surrounded me and demanded I accompany them to prison. Throughout, a man with a gun was never far away.

Far from achieving their goal of intimidating and undermining me, they showed me what I went to find—their true face. Their brutality, arrogance, and lack of humanity. Their self-righteousness, intolerance, and misogyny. Their incompetence and their utter lack of ability to rule. Afghanistan has fallen prey to terrorists who have not made and cannot make the transition from fighting force to governing body.

Everywhere I went in the short time I was in Kabul, people told me of their fear, their loss, their disgust, their desperation. Most have no jobs, no money, no hope for their future or the future of their children. What I found was a violent peace. People are arbitrarily detained, disappeared, interrogated, beaten, killed. It could be for any reason or no reason they will ever know. The Taliban are pitting neighbor against neighbor, encouraging people to spy on and report each other. Fear is digging in, and it's here for the long haul.

Australian war correspondent Lynne O'Donnell in the Netherlands after leaving Afghanistan.
Australian war correspondent Lynne O'Donnell in the Netherlands after leaving Afghanistan.
Australian journalist Lynne O'Donnell looks at her phone in Dordrecht in the Netherlands on Aug. 21, 2021, after leaving Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul. MASSOUD HOSSAINI FOR FOREIGN POLICY
The men in charge are violent men, proud of their violence. Foreign ministry spokesperson Abdul Qahar Balkhi, who spent years living in New Zealand, called me a "white supremacist colonialist" and threatened me with violence by reminding me of a 2016 Taliban attack on a local television station after it carried a false report and refused to retract it. "We are proud of that," Balkhi said. I told him that innocent people had been killed in the suicide attack on a bus taking employees home. "And we are proud of that," he said. I told him a friend of mine was among the dead. "And we are proud of that," he repeated.

I was told that articles I had written for Foreign Policy were fantasies, lies, concocted, and that my sources did not exist. And if the stories were true and the sources did exist, I was ordered to hand over all their names and details, as well as notes, photos, voice recordings, and video.

“There are no gays in Afghanistan,” I was told by one of the intelligence agents who came for me, who refused to tell me his name. His fellow agent, Ahmad Zaheel, told me that if he learned anyone was gay, “I will kill them.” The terrorists and extremists took umbrage at being referred to as terrorists and extremists.

“What is extremist?” I was asked. “You say there are no gays in Afghanistan—that seems to be quite an extremist point of view,” I countered.

When I asked what laws I’d broken, they told me, in a mix of Orwell and Kafka, “You know.” They’d look at each other, narrow their eyes, jut their chins, and say, “She knows.”

On the way to the headquarters of the intelligence agency, Zaheel showed me photographs of his two young daughters. Once there, they gave me tea, offered me candy, talked about their pets, asked me about my personal life, and even helped me plug in my phone charger. Only once did Zaheel try to take my phone, and that was when I tried to take his photo.

Throughout my detention, I was monitored by Australian diplomats and my colleague Massoud Hossaini on a WhatsApp group with location monitoring. I live-texted the entire four hours with them and my editors at Foreign Policy. So they accused me of being an “agent.” For whom? “You know.”

A report on the forced marriage practices of Taliban militants as they took over rural districts on their road to victory was just as odious to them as the report on LGBTQ people in Afghanistan. Sex was the prevailing theme of their anger.

When it came to my forced confession that I’d made it all up, I told them, “In all sincerity, hand on heart, this isn’t a good idea. It will make you look silly.” They didn’t care. They concocted the tweet, sent it to an unnamed boss to be tweaked and perfected, and then I tweeted it. They decided they didn’t like it, I deleted it, they edited it, and I tweeted again.

I won’t be back in Afghanistan anymore. Neither will most other Western journalists, many of whom have also been harried, hassled, and hustled away this week. Afghanistan’s once-proud independent media is no more, and now there’s nobody else. The country is descending into a hellscape of terror, hunger, and poverty. But who will tell the story?

After my tweet saga, they took a video confession. We did that twice, too, because I wrapped my headscarf around my neck like a noose as I said, “I haven’t been coerced.” We had a laugh, did it again, had some more tea, and then they drove me back to my guesthouse.

“You are now free to stay. You can go anywhere in the country—we will help you,” they said. I asked for a helicopter to Panjshir, the cockpit of armed resistance to the Taliban government, where reports of fierce fighting and terrible retribution against locals have been surfacing for months. Maybe not there, they said. And anyway, they didn’t have access to a chopper.

I settled for a plane. And left the place. But I won’t stop watching. Or caring.

Lynne O’Donnell is a columnist at Foreign Policy and an Australian journalist and author. She was the Afghanistan bureau chief for Agence France-Presse and the Associated Press between 2009 and 2017.