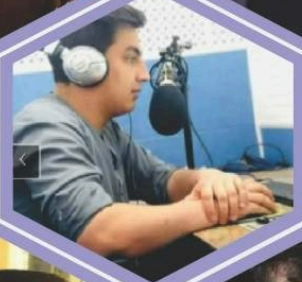




موسسه مصونیت و کاهش بحران  
SAFETY AND RISK MITIGATION ORGANIZATION  
**Civic Space Quarterly Report**  
Jan-Mar 2022



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**Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization**

**Civic Space Quarterly Report**

**January – March 2022**

## SRMO Afghanistan Civic Space Quarterly Report January to March 2022

### Context

Civic space in Afghanistan is shrinking week by week. The clampdown on criticism of all kinds has deepened in the first quarter of 2022 as the Taliban seeks to re-establish itself in power. The most intolerant factions within the leadership appear to be setting the agenda. Cases of serious human rights violations and suppression of the media by the Taliban are reported on a daily basis.

Detentions, harassment and persecution of human rights defenders (HRDs), women human rights defenders (WHRDs), civil society activists, media workers and Taliban critics have increased since January, resulting in a climate of fear and extensive self censorship.

The humanitarian situation remains dire, with UN agencies reporting that at least 23 million Afghans are facing acute food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> An economic crisis resulting from international sanctions and the withdrawal of aid and investment after the Taliban takeover has paralyzed the banking system and pushed millions of Afghans into destitution. To date, no countries have formally recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, though Russia, China, Pakistan and Turkmenistan have accepted the credentials of Taliban diplomats.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the lack of formal recognition, the de facto authorities have held various rounds of talks with international stakeholders over a range of issues. Negotiations were however set back by the Taliban's decision in March not to allow girls aged 12 and over to return to school, having previously promised to do so.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile resistance forces have started a spring offensive in various parts of Afghanistan, posing a challenge to the Taliban's de facto administration. Panjshir and Baghlan provinces have seen notable clashes, with some districts reportedly retaken from Taliban fighters.

### General human rights situation

#### Key trends:

- U-turn in March on reopening schools for girls from age 12 means that half the high school age population is still being denied the right to education
- Sharia courts are issuing ad hoc punishments (including stoning to death) with no due process and no right to defense or appeal
- Extra judicial killings of former security forces and former government officials continue at an alarming pace
- Taliban claims to be providing security for Afghans have been used to justify widespread house searches that have included intimidation, harassment, beatings, destruction of property and invasion of privacy<sup>4</sup>; undisciplined soldiers have also been responsible for numerous fatal checkpoint shootings
- Several local media stations have been closed down by the Taliban; those that continue to operate have been instructed not to broadcast foreign material including from news agencies such as the BBC, DW and Voice of America.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://unama.unmissions.org/humanitarian-donors-urged-step-again-afghanistan>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-latest-country-to-establish-diplomatic-ties-with-taliban/6521949.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-recent-taliban-decision-to-deny-afghan-girls-the-right-to-an-education/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Afghanistan-turmoil/Clearing-operations-bring-fresh-wave-of-restrictions-on-Afghans#:~:text=KABUL%20%2D%20The%20Taliban%20has,security%20sweeps%20in%20late%20February.>

- A raft of new restrictions on women have been issued, including restrictions on air travel, movement in urban areas and dress (though these are not implemented uniformly)<sup>5</sup>

The general human rights situation for the civilian population has deteriorated since the beginning of 2022. A slate of new restrictions have been issued that further constrict public life and civic space, while heavy handed behaviour from Taliban soldiers results in persistent human rights abuses and insecurity. Girls above the age of 12 are being denied an education, causing extensive harm to their individual futures and the future of the Afghan state and economy. With limited exceptions, most women are being denied their right to employment and are once again becoming prisoners in their own homes.

The UN Security Council on 17 March passed a resolution extending UNAMA's (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) mandate for 12 months. The resolution included language on human rights, gender equality and the rule of law. Despite this wording it was welcomed by the Taliban<sup>6</sup>, most likely because they view UNAMA's continued existence as a means of accessing desperately needed humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, in a positive move, the UN Human Rights Council appointed respected rights activist Richard Bennett as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.

## Situation for HRDs

### Key trends:

- Night raids targeting women's rights activists
- Arrests of commentators and activists who criticize the Taliban
- Threatening and detaining activists' families as a means of forcing them to end their criticism of the de facto authorities
- Ongoing and broadening harassment, intimidation, detentions and brutal beatings of media workers
- Raids on shelters housing human rights defenders

The Taliban's clampdown on civic space has broadened and deepened over the first three months of 2022. Human rights defenders – and particularly women activists – have been specifically targeted in detentions, disappearances and harassment simply for attempting to exercise their rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. A series of deeply troubling night raids targeting women who had attended anti-Taliban rallies spread fear throughout the activist community; the raids were illustrative of the de facto authorities' disdain for human rights and any form of legal due process.

Several women human rights defenders were effectively 'disappeared' after their arrests, with Taliban spokesmen denying that the group had detained them and claiming activists were making up stories as a means of seeking asylum overseas.<sup>7</sup> It later emerged that other parts of the Taliban had indeed been holding the women, some of whom have since been released but who have been unwilling or unable to discuss the details of their detention for fear of further harassment or worse

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-taliban-restrict-womens-rights-as-isolation-looms/a-61303513#:~:text=By%20going%20back%20on%20girls,for%20much%2Dneeded%20economic%20assistance.>

<sup>6</sup> <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-welcomes-unama-extension/31759178.html#:~:text=The%20vote%20to%20extend%20the,returned%20to%20power%20in%20August.>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/20/taliban-arrest-afghan-womens-rights-activist-witness-says>

from the Taliban.<sup>8</sup> A number of women had to make forced confessions (that they were directed to hold anti-Taliban rallies by foreigners) that were broadcast on national television.<sup>9</sup>

Very little information is known about how these women detainees have been treated while in custody. None of those released have provided details about their time in confinement to the media or NGOs, and none have continued their activism after their release. Local media reports suggest they have been forced to sign documents swearing that they will end their activism and not discuss their detentions. It is likely that the detainees were placed under significant psychological pressure, including through the use of threats against family members – several of whom were detained alongside the activists.

Adding to the sense of fear and opacity, it is often unclear which parts of the Taliban regime are responsible for detaining activists and media workers. On several occasions Taliban spokesmen and police officials have denied responsibility for arrests, which subsequently turn out to have been carried out by the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI). The GDI falls under the Ministry of Interior, currently headed by Sirajuddin Haqqani who appears on the US's most wanted list for his involvement in international terrorism.<sup>10</sup> The Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice also appears to be very active in curbing civic space, particularly with regard to imposing restrictions on broadcasting and intimidating journalists.<sup>11</sup>



*Women's Rights Activist Hanifa Nazari was shot dead on 18 January in Mazar-e Sharif*

### **Security situation**

Taliban officials claim Afghanistan is now peaceful and secure after years of war. However, incidents logged in SRMO's database suggest that the security environment remains unsettled with persistent reports of murders, civilians being caught in crossfire between rival Taliban factions/between Taliban and anti-Taliban resistance fighters; and IED attacks targeting Taliban vehicles that often kill bystanders. In addition, indiscriminate attacks by Taliban rival IS-KP have caused numerous civilian casualties, though the pace of bomb attacks on civilian targets has slowed since the last quarter of 2021.

In addition to the general insecurity caused by these dynamics, the Taliban have killed and arrested dozens of people who they claim have connections to the anti-Taliban resistance. Arrests are often arbitrary and many those detained effectively disappear, with families unable to find out their whereabouts. SRMO's database includes reports of at least 30 detentions and 8 killings of people accused of being involved in resistance activities between January and March 2022 – this is likely to be a small fraction of the total number.

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<sup>8</sup> [Canadian arrested by Taliban amid escalating crackdown on foreigners in Afghanistan - The Washington Post](#)

<sup>9</sup> <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-women-activists-forced-confessions/31718590.html>

<sup>10</sup> [Afghanistan's intelligence agency emerges as new threat to independent media - Committee to Protect Journalists \(cpj.org\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Taliban Detain Journalists, Issue Bans in Media Crackdown \(voanews.com\)](#)

### SRMO Database Summary: January to March 2022

<b>HR Abuses targeting civil society</b>	
<i>Incident Type</i>	<i>Cases<sup>12</sup></i>
Assassination of WHRD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hanifa Nazari, a WHRD and member of Women Peace Group of Balkh province, was shot dead by unidentified armed men on 18 January near her house in Karte Balkh Bastan, Mazar-e-Sharif. The victim was actively participating in protests against the Taliban and was doing women rights advocacy in Balkh province.</li> </ul>
Assassination of CSA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mehdi Wahidi a 30 years old advocate and civil society activist in Pul-I Khumni, Baghlan Province was shot and killed by unknown armed men on 19 January. The reason behind the killing remains unknown.</li> </ul>
Individual detentions of HRDs, CSAs and scholars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12 activists and their family members (a total of 5 men and 7 women) detained and eventually released</li> <li>12 more activists (10 men and 2 women) reported detained with no further details available</li> <li>Two university professors and two religious scholars were also detained during this period because of their criticism of the de facto authorities</li> </ul>
Group detentions of HRDs and CSAs <sup>13</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dozens of people were arrested on 23 January after a raid on a shelter in Mazar-e Sharif that was housing people who were awaiting evacuation flights; male detainees were released after a short period but several women were kept in detention because they had no male chaperone</li> <li>A group of 29 women and several family members were detained on 11 February in Kabul after a raid on a women's shelter</li> </ul>
Detentions of media workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>31 media workers detained and subsequently released</li> <li>A further 9 media workers detained with no further information known about their situation</li> <li>2 foreign journalists detained and released after international outcry</li> </ul>
Sexual violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unconfirmed reports that 8 women were raped after being arrested for taking part in anti-Taliban rallies in Mazar-e Sharif</li> </ul>
Intimidation and harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hundreds of cases of intrusive house and office searches that often include destruction of property, theft and beatings</li> </ul>
<b>HR Abuses targeting former government officials</b>	
Extrajudicial killings of former government officials and their relatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A former Ministry of Agriculture civil servant was shot dead on 21 January in Taloqan city, Takhar province</li> <li>An attack on a former government official's home in Qara Bagh, Ghazni province on 12 February resulted in deaths of his son, wife and bodyguards</li> </ul>

<sup>12</sup> Unless specified otherwise, case details come from the SRMO database (see Methodology section below). See <https://srmo.org/> for further details about the organization.

<sup>13</sup> Group detentions have been entered as a separate category because the exact numbers of people involved in these mass detentions are often unclear

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five relatives of a former MP were reportedly arrested on 14 February in Kabul city and subsequently killed</li> </ul>
Disappearance of former government official	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A former deputy head of the Afghanistan Election Commission was detained on 6 January in Kabul and subsequently disappeared; unconfirmed reports suggest he has been killed</li> </ul>
<b>HR Abuses targeting civilians</b>	
Cruel and inhuman punishments after deeply flawed trials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A man and woman were reportedly stoned to death on 14 February in Badakhshan for alleged adultery.</li> <li>• Two other women and one other man are also reportedly to have been shot dead because of alleged adultery. One couple were killed in Ghor for allegedly eloping while a woman was shot in Jawzjan for alleged adultery.</li> </ul>
Arbitrary killings of civilians by undisciplined Taliban soldiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were at least five cases of civilians being killed in checkpoint shootings; in one typical case on 13 January in Kabul a soldier had apparently waved a car through a checkpoint but his colleague didn't realise and opened fire, killing a 25 year old woman. On 19 February another woman was shot dead in Kandahar by Taliban troops while travelling in a rickshaw. Two other women were injured.</li> <li>• On 15 January a girl was shot dead after Taliban troops fired into a crowd of women queuing outside the passport office in Laghman province. Further injuries were reported when an angry crowd took the girl's body to the district governor's office and the Taliban again shot into the crowd.</li> </ul>
Arbitrary killings and detentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 30 reports of arbitrary arrests and 8 killings of civilians accused of involvement in resistance activities. Taliban soldiers have often conducted mass arrests after attacks on their personnel and vehicles.</li> </ul>
<b>HR Abuses targeting former security forces</b>	
Extrajudicial killings of former security force personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15 former police killed</li> <li>• 7 former soldiers killed</li> <li>• 2 former National Directorate of Security (NDS) killed</li> <li>• 2 former bodyguards of government officials killed</li> <li>• 1 former military doctor killed</li> <li>• 1 former military prosecutor killed</li> </ul>
Disappearances of former security force personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 former police disappeared</li> <li>• 2 former soldiers disappeared</li> <li>• 2 former National Directorate of Security (NDS) disappeared</li> <li>• 1 former guard at US base detained/disappeared</li> </ul>

### Security incidents involving Taliban soldiers Jan – March 2022

- Two Taliban reportedly killed in an IED attack in Faizabad, Badakhshan province on 7 March.
- A Taliban commander and 6 of his personnel were reportedly killed in an ambush in the Jamal Agha district of Kapisa province on 19 February
- A Taliban commander was killed on 7 February after his vehicle was targeted by a remote IED in Faizabad, Badkhshan.
- Several days of armed clashes were reported in the Khost Frenk district of Baghlan province in late January, resulting in several deaths and injuries though specific details of casualties are unknown
- A Taliban ranger vehicle was reportedly targeted by an IED in the Rukha district of Panjshir on 18 January. The Taliban detained several civilians after the incident.
- Clashes on 13 January between rival Taliban factions in Maimana, Faryab province, resulted in a reported 6 deaths.
- Two people were reportedly wounded when a Taliban vehicle was targeted by a magnetic IED in Kabul city on 12 January.

### About SRMO

The [Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization \(SRMO\)](#) is an Afghan-led NGO. It was established in May 2013 to provide protection and training for grassroots Human Rights Defenders (HRDs). SRMO's main objective is to empower HRDs so they can safely continue their crucial work. SRMO has particularly focused its assistance on local and grassroots' HRDs and WHRDs, recognizing their utmost vulnerability as being at the frontline of defending human rights.

SRMO monitors and tracks human rights abuses affecting human rights activists and civil society. The organization also provides regular trainings on Hostile Environment, Security, Digital and Cyber security, First aid and other topics. In addition, SRMO distributes regular and vital security information and mitigation advice to hundreds of HRDs and WHRDs in the provinces across Afghanistan. The organization also provides emergency assistance including emergency relocation and medical assistance for HRDs at risk. Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 SRMO has continued to provide support both to HRDs inside the country and to those who have fled and are now living in exile.

SRMO was itself affected by the Taliban search operations mentioned above. On 1 March 2022, 16 heavily armed soldiers entered the SRMO office with no prior warning and conducted an extensive search of the building and documents. Fortunately any sensitive documents had already been removed or destroyed; the Taliban did not find anything they considered suspicious and have not returned since. The search appears to have been part of mass citywide security sweeps in Kabul rather than having targeted SRMO directly. However, it served as a reminder of the fundamentally changed environment and the difficulty of trying to run a human rights NGO under a Taliban government.



## **Methodology**

This quarterly report is designed to provide a brief summary of the situation for human rights defenders in Afghanistan between January and March 2022. It is based on information and cases gathered as part of SRMO's ongoing human rights monitoring work. SRMO maintains a database of incidents and rights abuses affecting human rights activists, civil society more broadly, and Afghan civilians. Cases are only included in the SRMO database if they have been authenticated via SRMO's networks inside Afghanistan.