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GLOBAL

What it means to 'be disappeared' in the Taliban's Afghanistan

The Taliban is using biometrics provided by the international community to crack down on its opponents.

[Nikhil Kumar](#), Deputy Global Editor, and [Fatima Faizi](#), Freelance Reporter

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They were all men, all armed, and they came in the dead of night. Fawzia Sayedzada, a former academic at a university in Kabul, was at home with her family – her 12-year-old son and 29-year-old brother – when the men broke in, storming through her front door as though they were hunting dangerous criminals. “They didn’t knock,” the 32-year-old told Grid.

It was mid-September 2021, about a month [after the Taliban returned to power in Kabul](#)

following the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Days before the raid, on Sept. 7, Sayedzada had helped organize a protest calling on Afghanistan's new overlords to recognize rights and freedoms that had been erased, wholesale, by the Taliban regime that ruled more than two decades before: freedom of the press, and the rights of women and girls to work, travel and go to school. In sum, as Sayedzada put it to Grid, the freedom "to live our lives as we want to."

The raid on her home was retribution — part of a wider campaign by the Taliban as it settled back into power. That campaign has continued. Rights groups and activists inside the country told Grid that Afghanistan's new rulers have targeted people they perceive as threats: activists like Sayedzada, who have demanded that the group honor basic human rights, as well as former members of the security forces and officials who worked for the previous, U.S.-backed Afghan government.

Many of these people have disappeared; others have been forced into hiding.

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"These crimes are being committed with zero accountability," Zaman Sultani, South Asia researcher for the rights group Amnesty International, told Grid.

The precise number of these crimes is unclear. In the two-and-a-half months that followed the Taliban's return to power, Human Rights Watch **documented** the "summary execution or enforced disappearance" of 47 former Afghan security officials — people in the military, the police and other institutions who had worked under the U.S.-backed government. Meanwhile, the **Afghanistan Journalists Center**, a local media watchdog group, has recorded more than 70 instances of journalists being detained since last summer.

Amnesty's Sultani told Grid that he and his colleagues had investigated several other cases of "arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances" since the Taliban takeover. The targets: "former members of the security forces, government officials,

journalists and civil society activists.”

The Taliban campaign of retribution is unfolding as the new regime attempts to portray itself as a reformed movement, capable of ruling a country that has changed dramatically over the past two decades. During that time, Afghans built up a vast and vibrant media sector, tens of thousands of women entered the workforce, and a new security apparatus was put in place. **Speaking to NPR** soon after the group returned to power last year, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen denied suggestions that there would be “any kind of reprisal nor any revenge”; that promise, he said, would apply to “the entire country.”

But today, many of the gains are at risk. Although parts of the media sector continue to operate, thousands of journalists have lost their jobs — **particularly women**, who have also been driven from government positions. Female activists have been **detained**, as have **many of those** women who worked with the previous internationally backed administration, according to accounts gathered by Grid and others.

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In interviews, rights workers and activists said that while it was hard to determine exactly how many people had been targeted, it is clear that the Taliban is acting with impunity, unconcerned about international condemnation. “They don’t care what anybody thinks,” Sayedzada told Grid.

The only choice: escape

On that night in September, Sayedzada was blindfolded, along with her son and her brother, as the Taliban fighters went room to room, searching for evidence that she had worked with collaborators to undermine the regime. “They asked me who I was working for and who paid me to organize the protest,” she told Grid. The men accused her of spying for the Taliban’s enemies. “They repeatedly called me a slut and a whore in front of my son,” she said.

Then all three were detained: Sayedzada and her son at one location, her brother somewhere else.

She learned later that her brother had been subjected to beatings while she was interrogated. "They wanted me to identify the other protesters and the other organizers. They wanted their phone numbers and addresses," she told Grid. They threatened to do what the rights community refers to as "disappear" her – to make sure that she would never be heard from or seen again – unless she cooperated. "Finally I had to lie," she said. It was her only way out.

Sayedzada told the Taliban men that she would help them locate the other women and men behind the protest. "I told them, 'Let me go, and I will do it,'" she said.

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For all the trauma of her experience, Sayedzada is among the lucky ones. She was released a day later, along with her son. Her brother was held for two weeks. "He was tortured," she said. "They wanted to scare me into not protesting again. So they kept him."

The only reason Sayedzada felt safe in speaking with Grid is that she is no longer in Afghanistan. She managed to escape from Kabul earlier this year with her son, thanks to help from a nonprofit organization working covertly to provide safe passage out of Afghanistan, which provided details to Grid under the condition of anonymity. Sayedzada said she knows others who have been less fortunate – those who have been "disappeared" in recent months.

The "disappeared"

Among the most prominent cases in the Taliban campaign is the disappearance of Alia Azizi, a women's prison director who hasn't been seen or heard from since October last year. "It has been nine months," her brother, Mohammad Nazir Arefi, told Grid. "No one knows where she is or what happened to her."

For more than a decade and a half, Azizi was a policewoman under the previous Afghan administration, rising ultimately to become a prison director in Herat, Afghanistan's third-largest city. After the Taliban took over last summer, she initially stayed home before being summoned back to work by the new leadership. A local contact [who spoke to Human Rights Watch](#) said Azizi was told that "as there are women prisoners, we need you to come back to work." That fit a pattern in the months following the Taliban's return; while most of the country's roughly 4,000 female police officers lost their jobs, exceptions were made for those like Azizi who were charged with managing prisons for women.

But two months after the Taliban takeover, Azizi — a personification of the ways in which Afghanistan had progressed over the past two decades — went missing: She reported to work one morning in early October, and there has been no sign of her since. To this day, the precise reasons or circumstances surrounding her disappearance remain unclear.

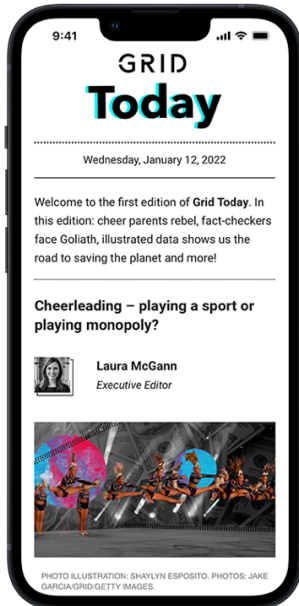
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"We went to the Taliban so many times to try and find her, but they haven't done anything," her brother told Grid.

Fearful of being similarly "disappeared" or detained by the Taliban, many Afghans have gone underground. "The situation is worse than ever," Bashir, a 20-year-old student who has been in hiding since late August last year, told Grid. His "crime": advocating for peace and women's rights on social media in the days leading up to the Taliban takeover; he was detained in August when Taliban members seized his home city of Kandahar. Grid has changed his name to protect his identity.

"I was tortured for hours, beaten with a pipe," he told Grid. "They called me a spy and

infidel. They humiliated me.”

Bashir was released after a few days because he happened to know someone connected to the new Afghan leadership. But he was told to keep a low profile — his past activism leaves him at risk of being rounded up and tortured again, he told Grid. “I’ve been moving from province to province to stay safe,” he said. “Afghanistan has become a prison for its people now. I’ve tried to get out of the country a few times, but it has not been possible so far. I have to keep moving, otherwise I don’t know what they will do to me.”

When technology helps the repression

Compounding the fears of rights groups and activists are the new tools at the Taliban’s disposal — including **biometric databases** set up over the past 20 years, before the militant group returned to power.

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From a national biometric system used for issuing ID cards to payroll systems covering various arms of the local law enforcement, these digital repositories hold vast amounts of data about ordinary Afghans — everything from iris scans and photos to fingerprints, addresses and other personal information. One system used by the Afghan interior and defense ministries in recent years held detailed data about army and police personnel — including information about their extended family and tribal networks.

The systems were funded by the international community with a variety of goals: to better manage personnel, to help curb corruption and to help with security. One U.S.-funded system was used to “identify people whom the U.S. believed might pose a security risk as well as those working for the U.S. government,” according to Human Rights Watch. The United States wasn’t alone: Funding for the various databases used by the Afghan state also came from institutions such as the World Bank and U.N. agencies.

But in the wake of the U.S. departure, there is evidence that the Taliban is attempting to

make use of these systems in its campaign of retribution. A former military commander, [speaking to Human Rights Watch researchers](#) earlier this year, recalled how he was detained for 12 days by the new authorities in November, during which time they scanned his irises and took his fingerprints. "They told me they took my fingerprints to check if I was military and if they could confirm it, they would kill me," he said. "I was very lucky that for some reason they did not get a match."

Hanif Khan, another former military commander, also counts himself lucky. Speaking to Grid from an undisclosed location inside the country, he said two former soldiers under his command had already been killed by the Taliban. As with Bashir, Grid has changed the commander's name to protect his identity, as he remains in Afghanistan.

"They had promised a general amnesty, but it is a joke," he said. "They took two of my soldiers four months after coming to power. Both of them were tortured to death, and dozens of others I know have been tortured multiple times. I've escaped because I have been in hiding all this time. One night I am in one place, the next time somewhere else. I don't have a life."

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Khan told Grid that before the Taliban takeover, he would hunt the militants. "Now they hunt me," he said.

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Nikhil Kumar | Deputy Global Editor

Nikhil Kumar is the deputy global editor at Grid, reporting on global affairs.

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