BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

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Courtesy of Marc Wattrelot

RUMOR AND REPORTING ARE UNAVOIDABLY INTERTWINED IN PAKISTAN.

Hamid Mir appeared quietly satisfied. The normally voluble television anchor for Geo News sat in an editing booth in Islamabad last February, watching intently through a series of interviews

he had conducted earlier that week. On the computer screen's editing window he pressed young children to describe the sound of Army bombardments, before encouraging brightly dressed Baloch women to explain how their sons, nephews, or husbands had been "disappeared." This occasionally inflammatory reporter (who famously found an incendiary device attached to the underside of his car) had just returned from 48 hours in Balochistan, where he had been reporting on the effects of the ongoing conflict there.

Mir seemed genuinely enthusiastic about this rare opportunity to counter the "official" and sanctioned narrative about the insurgency there. But there was also no disguising the relief he felt that he and his crew had returned unscathed, and a certain exuberant relish for having done so in spite of innumerable government obstacles. "Getting access is so difficult," he acknowledged, as he and his editor fast-forwarded through the clips. I told him I could sympathize.

As the author of a new book about the region, *Balochistan at a Crossroads,* I have spent some rewarding but challenging weeks in the remote deserts and mountain ranges of Pakistan's largest province. The vast and sometimes inhospitable interior remains almost completely off-limits to foreign journalists and just a handful have reported there extensively over the past decade. As a consequence, the province's conflicts and horrors garner very little international attention: Baloch insurgents continue to wage a low-intensity war against the Pakistani military and civilian targets; military intelligence agencies allegedly kidnap young Baloch activists before dumping their bodies on roadsides; border authorities by turns combat and connive with cartels smuggling Afghan heroin; Sunni extremists target Hazara pilgrims in mass bombings; and Afghan Taliban rest up their war-weary limbs during Quetta's harsh winter months.

And while every number of these should warrant further media scrutiny, amongst these varied narratives I have found that the Baloch insurgency, a major focus of *Balochistan at a Crossroads,* is perhaps the storyline that Pakistani authorities want publicized least of all.

My friend and collaborator Marc Wattrelot—a talented French photojournalist whose emotive black and white images haunt the pages of our new book—will tell you that writing, editing and type-setting has proved to be a time consuming and at times exhausting process for the two of us. But he also likes to joke that these exertions pale in comparison to the patience and luck required in successfully reaching and reporting from Balochistan during our visits.

But for the region's local reporters, such attributes have hardly proved sufficient when it comes to their long-term survival. Shahzad Zulfiqar is a veteran Quetta-based journalist and has written for the *Herald, Newsline* and *The Nation* and reported on Balochistan for Samaa TV, crisscrossing the province from Dalbandin to Gwadar to Khuzdar and everywhere in between to interview insurgent commanders repeatedly over the course of two obstinate and brave decades.

He says that at least 22 journalist colleagues have been killed in the past four years; local militant groups claimed six of those murders, and security forces dispatched the remaining 16, family members of the victims tell him. Local reporters are increasingly caught between

militants with Baloch nationalist aspirations who wish to control the narrative for their own purposes, and a security apparatus that wants to starve those same militants of any and all potential publicity.

During a recent phone call with Zulfiqar, I asked him to enumerate the expanding threats that loom over the shrinking local press corps today. “On the top of the list are the intelligence agencies,” came his immediate answer. “Second is the Frontier Corps, the paramilitary forces.” Sunni extremist groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi were a close third, he continued, followed by the Baloch insurgent groups. “These are all people who don’t spare journalists,” was his matter-of-fact conclusion.

Zulfiqar was once fired from his job after he recorded an on-camera interview with an Iranian Baloch militant called Abdulmalik Rigi—a solicitous but zealous young man I had also met with on a previous occasion. Rigi was subsequently captured in uncertain circumstances and executed by Iran’s authorities, but just by talking to him in person Zulfiqar had exposed himself to official hostility. Senior security officers in Balochistan were apparently embarrassed because their Iranian counterparts had chastised them for allowing a local journalist to interview Rigi, at the time Iran’s most sought after terrorist. The senior officers immediately redirected their ire and made their displeasure known to the employers of this veteran reporter who had simply been doing his job.

Far worse was to come though, when Zulfiqar helped arrange an interview for an American newspaper reporter, Carlotta Gall, and photographer Scott Eells, with an ageing aristocratic figurehead of the Baloch insurgency, Nawab Akbar Bugti. Gall, who reported for *The New York Times* in Pakistan and Afghanistan for many years, said the visit was her first to Balochistan. “To go on and then obviously see the rebels, that was extraordinarily difficult and a bit risky,” she recalls now. “And it was certainly risky for the people who took us in.” Following a grueling journey into the mountains southeast of Quetta, and some time spent with Bugti and a small cadre of his tribesmen, her American newspaper splashed the scoop. “The ISPR and military were furious about my story about Bugti,” says Gall, who is now the *Times*’ correspondent for North Africa. “There was a big picture of him on the front page of *The New York Times,* and the military spokesperson said, ‘you made him into a hero.’ They were furious.”

Zulfiqar, who had acted as the go-between and travel companion for Gall and Eells on the trip, became the easiest target for that fury. “When I came back to Quetta they called me, ‘please let’s have a cup of tea.’” He went to meet a brigadier from Military Intelligence, who immediately began to shout at him. “‘Forget about journalism, when you enter my room, you are an anti-state element,’” the military man apparently scolded him. “‘Why have you taken these bastards? How many dollars did you receive from these Americans?’” This was his last warning, Zulfiqar was told in no uncertain terms: “‘Next time you will bear the consequences.’” The higher-ups had allegedly instructed the brigadier, “‘make him understand, or if not, perish him.’”

Zulfiqar kept his head down for a while, and refrained from asking difficult questions of security leaders at Quetta press conferences. “I stayed silent,” he admits.

International journalists readily accept how dangerous it is for locals like Zulfiqar who help them in Balochistan; Gall told me that at least one other person who helped her on a story in the region was subsequently forced to flee the country. An interpreter Marc and I both worked with, and to whom our book is dedicated, passed away very suddenly a couple of years ago. Recently some of his friends contacted me to say that his family members now suspect that security agents, angered by his political activities, may have poisoned him.

Courtesy of Marc Wattrelot

Like many such allegations leveled in Balochistan, it is hard to separate fact from fiction. However, I am more certain about the fate of another young Baloch translator, who hails from the Iranian side of the border; in 2007, he helped me interpret my interview with the militant commander Rigi. After Iranian and Pakistan authorities sought to arrest him for this daylong assignment with me, he has subsequently sought and won political asylum from the UNHCR, and we are together working to find him a new home inside a safe European nation.

Other more high-profile journalists have been forced to flee Balochistan, including Ayub Tareen of the BBC, who in 2012 told Reporters Without Borders he had faced death threats from a militant separatist group for reporting on their movement in what they alleged to be a

partisan manner. And Malik Siraj Akbar, the star Baloch reporter of his generation who now lives in D.C. after winning political asylum in the United States, wrote that his decision to leave Balochistan was in part driven by the deaths of a dozen journalist friends over the course of a single year.

The departure of journalists from Balochistan—or worse, their targeted killing—can have a chilling effect on their peers who remain. And the result, as Ahmed Rashid has pointed out, is "self-censorship" as a form of self-preservation. But such violent infringements on press freedom rarely warrant attention outside the region unless a foreign journalist is involved. *The New York Times*' Gall became an unwilling poster child for this phenomenon, after Pakistani government agents famously punched her in the face at her Quetta hotel in 2006, before confiscating her reporting notes and a laptop.

"I think Balochistan has been very important to the Pakistan military, to run their operations there, to be able to control the Baloch tribes, to be able to do as they please," posits Gall. "That's why diplomats can't travel there, that's why journalists get hassled there. And I think my treatment was designed to deter others. Ultimately other journalists got scared, who see what happened." Gall says her profile of Bugti's struggle against Musharraf's military state was the first time she truly antagonized Pakistan's security forces. A subsequent trip to Waziristan and an attempt to report on Afghan Taliban presence in Quetta only angered the authorities further, and ultimately all this led to her physical assault. "From then on I had great difficulties with visas," she told me on the eve of a recent reporting trip to Libya. "I think I was blacklisted."

The first and often greatest obstacle for any foreign reporter wishing to report inside Balochistan is simply getting your hands on a journalist visa. Then to travel outside major cities, you will also require a "No Objection Certificate" as an accompaniment to the visa in your passport. This piece of faxed paper signed by various government entities, all of which state that they have "no objection" to your travel plans, is from my experience far more important than a passport when visiting many of the more troubled districts of the province. And consequently it remains the primary means by which foreign journalists who visit Pakistan are prevented from traveling easily outside Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. The ostensible reason for such restrictive measures is to safeguard overseas visitors, but in the view of most foreign journalists I have spoken with, the often Kafka-esque process for obtaining an N.O.C. is also important as a tool for discouraging the kind of enterprise reporting that might well uncover some unwelcome truths.

Horror stories about Pakistani visa bureaucracy abound among the foreign press corps, but my own nadir came in the autumn of 2008, as I tried to obtain a journalist visa and N.O.C. that would allow me to travel once more to Quetta. It involved dozens of early morning and frustrating phone calls from London to low-level mandarins in Islamabad, who repeatedly made promises that they just as often broke. The unspoken reality, it turned out, was that access to the region is not something the hacks from the External Publicity Wing could actually grant me. My visit would require signoffs from Pakistan's intelligence agencies, including the ISI and MI. Fully three months later, after interventions from several senior politicians, my request was granted. But for some reporters who cannot abide such a wait, the

solution is simply to skip the process altogether.

“I wasn’t traveling there on a journalist visa,” explained Karlos Zurutusa, a Basque journalist who wrote several dispatches from Baloch areas inside both Pakistan and Iran. “I was traveling on a visitor visa. The Pakistan Embassy in Madrid told me it was very dangerous, I should fly to Islamabad, I should by no means travel to Quetta.” But by claiming to be a history teacher interested in ancient routes to India, he made it into Pakistan’s Balochistan province from Iran. Zurutusa concedes that this approach carried other risks with it. “The people who were helping me were horribly scared I was putting them in danger.” He recently wrote a piece for Al Jazeera’s website, inspired by his own experiences, that described Balochistan as a “black hole for media.” Adrenaline was a major reporting tool when he visited Baloch insurgent camps, he told me, but that could only last so long. “I think I got to understand how dangerous it was once I was outside.”

Declan Walsh and Nick Schmidle are two other reporters who know all about being on the outside and looking back into Pakistan. The Irishman Walsh, who is a successor to Gall at *The New York Times,* and the American Schmidle, who wrote a widely-read dispatch from Quetta for the *Times* and is now on the staff of the *New Yorker,* were both forced to depart Pakistan involuntarily. And while the two were not removed from Pakistan specifically for their reporting in Balochistan, their departure certainly reduced by two the number of Pakistan-based foreign reporters who were willing or able to report from the troubled province. Other American reporters previously based in Islamabad have told me that they were loathe to initiate undercover trips into Balochistan, for fear of prompting their own expulsion from Pakistan—which in turn would create headaches for their employers. “I would say that yes, that is a worry,” says Gall, “but you should never not do a story because you’re worried about your visa or your residency being revoked.”

But if you do make it into the province, and encounter a degree of freedom of movement, extracting verifiable facts and obtaining accurate answers from the authorities oftentimes resembles a dystopian exercise in onion-peeling. Rumor and reporting are unavoidably intertwined elsewhere in Pakistan of course; the byproducts of clamoring, competing and overtly political narratives. But Balochistan too often suffers from quite the opposite—a dearth of public information, unreliable sources, a lack of context and official secretiveness.

“I don’t know if I would dare to do it again now,” Zurutusa told me from the Basque country in northern Spain. “I wouldn’t dare to step foot in Pakistan again.”

I have sometimes expressed a similar sentiment to friends and family after trips to Balochistan, in which police officers have attempted to smash my camera, or intelligence agents have physically detained and interrogated me at the airport departure gate. But I’ll be back again this weekend to talk about the conflicts still ravaging Balochistan. And I am hopeful that no government agencies will try to stop me telling the truth about what I’ve seen and heard, and learned.

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