

## Shoaib Sharifi Part One Transcript

**Shoaib Sharifi:** And I see a person, so this executer, with a big dagger approaching. There's somebody's life is to be ended there.

And all of that really meant my heart started pounding and affected me in that a man with a dagger was approaching to chop a head - and I fainted.

**Ramita Navai:** From *Aurra Studios*. This is **The Line of Fire** with me, Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talk to fellow journalists about covering war and the life changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**.

My guest today is one of Afghanistan's greatest journalists, multi award-winning Shoaib Sharifi has been covering his home country for the last 22 years. He's a former BBC world service Kabul bureau chief launching the acclaimed political debate program Open Jirga.

Shoaib is one of the few Afghan journalists who decided to stay on after the Taliban took power in August, 2021. And he's currently the country director for BBC media action.

Shoaib welcome.

Shoaib, we've known each other a very long time. We met, I remember clearly the day we met in 2005, and you were so helpful and so generous. I will never forget that. And you have a reputation for helping journalists, big names, freelancers alike that come through Kabul.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I think Afghanistan was off the media radar for four decades, at least, and when you and I met it was the golden days of Afghanistan when after 40 years of no connection with the West - the foreign world had opened, we had a fully-fledged free press and the intention, alongside being an Afghan and meaning you'll feel a sense of being, you know, hospitable - but also to help really, the international world, really understand the true story of Afghanistan.

I met you about three years after my first visit when I had come to Britain and whoever I bumped into they said, Oh, you're from Afghanistan. Oh my God. Osama bin Laden, terrorism. And, I was really, I couldn't correct them. I couldn't change it just by saying no, we also, we have got a different side to the coin. We are also just a normal nation, like anybody else. We also love a good life. We also love our families. We also love each other. And we also love the outside world. We also love to live in peace and... just go and play football and watch movies, or do whatever and be kind to each other.

And so one of the reasons for being really helpful to visiting foreign journalists was to really help tell the story of Afghanistan - a true story of a very resilient, but super kind people.

**Ramita Navai:** Yeah. And I mean, I think that really strikes me about you is that you live and breathe journalism. It's really clear how important it is to you. How did you start out in journalism? What made you decide to be a journalist?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Perhaps inspired by my grandmother. She was a great storyteller and, so I had that in mind that I enjoyed and still until now I'm benefiting quite a lot from what I received from my grandmother. But also we had a weird competition in our neighbourhood. It started with learning English and every boy in my age, 15, 16 wanted to learn English.

There were not many courses. A lot of us were doing self-study and I had a secret weapon and that was the BBC, which is the BBC World. My father, thanks to my father, who helped me record the BBC World.

And I would listen to it and listen to it, imitate, imitate again and again and again, to pick up the accent and then, just have an upper hand amongst my friends on the street. That's how. How, not even being exposed to a foreigner you have the accent of a foreigner? And then I heard that one of the boys (when I was just about a late 17 or early 18), that one of my rival boys on the street got a job and became a presenter in an English program in radio - the voice of Sharia. So that was the Taliban.

**Ramita Navai:** What was the radio voice of Sharia?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** So that was radio Afghanistan. When Taliban took over in 96, they renamed radio Afghanistan as radio voice of Sharia.

So it didn't matter at all. I wanted to also be a presenter. I have the accent, he doesn't, but he got a job. I went there and I passed the accent test, but I failed the beard test. I didn't have a beard. Well, I was too young as well for that, but.

**Ramita Navai:** How old were you?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I was just 18. Perhaps early 18.

**Ramita Navai:** Hang on a minute. So you were 18 years old, and your friend had got a job with radio Sharia that was the Taliban's radio station?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes.

**Ramita Navai:** And you also wanted a job there to beat your friend?

**[Ramita laughs]**

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I wanted to beat my friend and the street. I had the best accent and that friend got a job.

**Ramita Navai:** Classic journalist. Classic competitive journalist. It was in your blood.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes! I want to also be there because so how come? I went there and I said, look, I have this accent. It was the English program. So the Taliban in the first reign, '96 to 2001, they also broadcast in the radio voice of Sharia an Arabic program and the English program as well.

But I unfortunately failed that and it was such a disheartening moment. I wanted that at no cost. I wanted to be a presenter. I couldn't change. I couldn't put on an artificial beard.

**Ramita Navai:** And what did they say? You say, did they, did they tell you that the beard was a requirement? How did they say that you'd failed that test?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Just by bad luck. I would say it happened that in that month, perhaps the Mullah Omar, the former leader of the Taliban, had issued a decree that nobody who doesn't have a beard should be a civil servant.

And those who do not have a beard naturally are deemed as under-age and are not qualified to be recruited.

**Ramita Navai:** And I guess Shoaib let's just explain this for listeners who may not know why beards are so important to the Taliban. And even now, you know, they issued a decree didn't they, saying that they advise all men to grow their beards and that's because the prophet had a beard.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah. So, the prophet had a beard, they say it's Sunna. So the practice of the prophet. One of the practices was that he had never shaved his beard. So there were some practices that he did it on and off and this beard - he lived with it throughout. They say - you need to also have a long beard.

So it's not just a bit, it has to be

**Ramita Navai:** Big and bushy. **[Ramita laughs]**

**Shoaib Sharifi:** A big and bushy beard and to have a big and bushy beard. I didn't have a big bushy beard naturally, even when, until 22 or 23. Some beards are really slow and unfortunately mine was one of those. So it was a shattering blown for that moment. And I wanted to get to come into journalism, willy nilly by any means and alongside...

**Ramita Navai:** Even if it meant working for the Taliban?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Well, the thing is before that there was a brutal regime, the Taliban was a brutal, but before them, it was also a brutal one. So for four decades, people lived, people had to work for a ruling government. So it wasn't a new thing for me because my dad was a general of the army for the pro-communist regime. And the regime had done so many killings and brutalities.

Just before the Taliban, we had the Mujahideen government that triggered the civil war. Thousands were killed. So it was not a strange thing to be working for a government that is not...

**Ramita Navai:** That is not a democratic, peaceful government.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Democratic, yes. So we hadn't seen any example of a good one before. So it was just like my dad, when at his age of getting a job, he went and got a job for the ruling, very brutal regime.

And I just happened to be, unfortunately, his son, also living at a time when there was yet another brutal regime.

**Ramita Navai: [Explainer]** Afghanistan has been in crisis for over 40 years. In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded, sparking an insurgency, with conservative Islamists and ethnic leaders forming guerrilla groups known collectively as the Mujahideen. Foreign support for these rebels poured in from Pakistan, Iran, China and the US. After ten years of conflict, the USSR finally withdrew, leaving 1 million civilians dead. Then followed a brutal civil war. And after that, militant fundamentalists, the Taliban, rose to power, enforcing their strict and twisted interpretation of Islam with ferocity. They were thrown out when US forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001, in response to the September 11 attacks. Then followed 20 years of more war and insurgency, with the US finally withdrawing in August 2021 - leaving the Taliban back in power.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** So it was something normal.

**Ramita Navai:** And life carries on and you have to live and you have to live with what you've got.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes, indeed. So just as still slightly twisted, what happened, how I then got into that.

At that time, an international media outlet wanted to train 10 cameramen, qualified, experienced cameramen, so that they would recruit two of them. And they asked me if I could translate and I was a translator for 10 days of this advanced camera training.

And after that, I really was so envious every day to see all these people with these advanced cameras, it was the first time I'd touched a camera then. But just a week

after that training, I met the person again and he said, that unfortunately, all of the 10, when the job descriptions were told to them, they all refused to take the job.

And can you find me some other people that are brave?

The job was to go cover the front line or go undercover and cover the executions that Taliban back then were doing routinely, in fact, at least once a month, there were some public executions at the sports stadium in Kabul.

I said, look, I brought you the most experienced and the bravest, if they couldn't take it, others can't. And I saw an opportunity there. I said, look, I have learned quite a lot in those 10 days of translation, I had to understand the lesson to explain it to those camera people. I'm happy to pass the camera test.

And I would like to get this job and I can go to any frontline, anywhere, also the stadium, but, I can assure you and I'm happy to pass this camera test. So he said, well, you know, you don't have to pass this camera test. There's an even more difficult test you have to pass. There is an execution happening the next week or so, and if you manage to smuggle the camera in. If you can't film, somebody else could film it. You just - if you could manage to smuggle the camera inside this stadium. I said, no, I want to smuggle it in, I want to film, if you give all this job to me and now with that, I will prove, and promise that it's not my last assignment and I'm happy to go to the front lines as well.

**Ramita Navai:** I mean Shoaib. Wow. Whoa. Back up. I mean, this is extraordinary that you were told that if you want to get a job as a journalist, if you want a trainee job as a journalist, that the only way to do this is to smuggle a camera into, a former football stadium where the Taliban are carrying out executions, and you not only say that you're going to smuggle it in, but you're insisting that you're going to be the one secretly filming this.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes.

**Ramita Navai:** What were you thinking? **[Ramita laughs]**

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Well, in fact, in a way an answer to your very first question, because if you wanted to become a journalist, you had to work for the state media and this one was the only opportunity to work for a non-state media, but also to have better exposure to cameras and to advanced things that I would never have in my life.

So I was really prepared to go by any means and ends to really get that. And to be fair to them, they were, I was too insistent them rather than them pushing me. They were saying that, Nope, I think it is not good for you. We need to find somebody else. And I really said it is me. Believe me, I can get that for you.

**Ramita Navai:** Who was this? What was this organization? You can't say? Right? So it's an international organization.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I can tell you but...

**Ramita Navai:** So you can't say for security reasons, but it was an international organization that wanted you to secretly film an execution. Why were you prepared to risk your life to do this?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** That was a window that I could see a bit of a fire there, but also a bright, big future beyond it into the career of journalism.

I had to go through that. That was the only opportunity to find my way into the world of journalism. And I was super enthusiastic and I loved it so much that I hadn't thought about what it meant that I was committing to as well. I think I had, you know, when we're driving, we say this car has a blind spot.

So perhaps I had a lot of blind spots. I didn't know that they were a tiny little brightness but, wow, this is the opportunity now or never, I can do it. Get it!

**Ramita Navai:** I mean it's terrifying hearing your thought process because if you had been caught, you would have been executed.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes, yes.

**Ramita Navai:** So tell me how you did this.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** So, it's a stadium in the heart of Kabul. Normally it houses about 20,000 people, but on the days of execution, at least 30 to 40,000 people would come into that stadium. So the scene if I explained to you is like some of those gladiator movies where people gather.

**Ramita Navai:** When they're packed around an amphitheatre.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah. And see that some killing is happening there.

So out of shock, out of interest, out of whatever, people just come in. And then the city where every other means of entertainment is forbidden. So there's only one thing. Unfortunately that's executions.

**Ramita Navai:** It's a form of entertainment.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah, tens of thousands would gather to see, well, whatever happens in your city.

So I reced it and I saw that a Taliban would frisk you from top to bottom all the way outside, but not in your -

**Ramita Navai:** Inner thigh.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I shouldn't share all of my secrets now but yes inside your thighs. So the camera was a Sony Handycam, the size of a mug.

**Ramita Navai:** A small mug? A tea mug?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah. So yeah, tea mug. And so I put it exactly on my right thigh.

I remember it like now. Tie it inside.

**Ramita Navai:** Strapped it in.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Inside my trousers. So Afghan shalwar kameez is very baggy. Strapped it. And I had three other friends, one behind, two along my side to help me in that really crowded entry, but still everyone got frisked. And perhaps because not knowing, that not even looking at what it meant if I was caught, for me it was what it meant if I got *in*, I would get into the whole world of journalism.

**Ramita Navai:** You weren't thinking about the consequences?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Never. Didn't think about the consequences. Perhaps that gives me a very brave face that I got through inside the stadium. And it was my first time as well, inside that stadium as well. Just a...

**Ramita Navai:** So you had never gone to a public execution?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I had never even gone to a big stadium to watch football either.

So in my life, because as I pointed out that the civil war happened, the age that they should have been playing football or go with friends to the stadium, was all ruined because of war. And so the first time in my life, I entered a stadium that was meant for football, there was an execution. But it still was beautiful for me.

It was, I had never seen that, Russian-built stadium, built by the Soviets - and the crowd. So everything is quiet, but it was jam packed against the walls. So it was estimated between 30 to 40,000 people. And I wanted a safe enough distance. I can remember exactly like today. I was just three layers above the announcers.

So they were the board that would be the judges, Taliban officials would be there. So I was three or four layers - steps or stairs, or rows above them.

**Ramita Navai:** So you were three rows above the Taliban judges who are going to judge the cases?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** To announce the execution. Yeah. So the moment, this is how it worked. So the person to be executed would be brought in, and then these officials would say, what happens so often, people accused of murder would be brought in

and then the case would be read by one of the officials and in a way they would plead to the audience saying, can you - so this person has done - has killed his brother or neighbour or somebody.

And we would really highly encourage him to be pardoned - the victim's family to pardon. If the victim's family pardons, the - so all of this is I'm hearing for the first time in my life. I see that. And this 13...

**Ramita Navai:** So if a victim's family can pardon the accused and if they do the execution won't happen.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes. The execution won't happen.

**Ramita Navai:** It's the same in Iran.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah. So they are there, they present sometimes they would give the gun or the dagger to the victim's family. So what is it called in Islam Qisas. So, and then it's announced and encouraged, encouraging this 30 or 40,000 people. You hear them say: Bebaksh! Bebaksh!

**Ramita Navai:** Pardon.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Forgive. Forgive or pardon.

And very rarely would see that the family would pardon. And then so still I'm...

**Ramita Navai:** So the crowd are cheering for the accused to be pardoned, but it's up to the family of the victim and the family of the victim, you say, rarely pardons?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Rarely pardons. Yeah.

**Ramita Navai:** Right. Which means the execution will go ahead.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** So yeah. So in this case, it went ahead and for me it still was like, I didn't know, I hadn't seen it.

Because under the Taliban TV was banned. Bit of background. So why I and many people had not seen it, or are coming to see it for the first time because TV was banned. So there were no TV stations. Filming was like a capital crime, of course, no TV and filming.

In my case, I was committing two crimes. A) filming was banned, so you should not be filming. And then I was doing secret filming for something that was happening and was prohibited. So it was...

**Ramita Navai:** Double execution. **[Both laugh]**



**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah double execution. But, I started feeling uneasy when they are saying, the moment is reaching where they're saying okay, there is no pardon. The family says this has to happen. And I'm feeling slightly uneasy to see what is really happening. And for that case. A lot of the time executions would happen at gunpoint, so they would just turn the gun and... A lot of them they would bring one for execution and one person if somebody was accused of a robbery would bring in to chop the hand or so on.

So I've got my camera, I've got one friend on my left, one friend on my right and one behind me, so that they sort of covered me. And I've got this shawl, it's kind of a big Afghan, scarf for men that you would wear...

**Ramita Navai:** So you've unstrapped it from your leg and you're holding it up?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I unstrapped it, it's in my hand.

And I see that a person, so this executer with a big dagger is approaching, I am seeing it - now explaining the picture sounds so horrible to me. So my heart starts pounding that there's something happening. There's something - it is - I think if I explain it that I felt that the shortage of power is happening in your brain, that short cut is happening at the highest speed the brain is trying to process what you are seeing, were you prepared to see that? There's somebody whose life is to be ended there.

And all of that really, my heart started pounding and affected me that a man with a dagger approaching to chop a head and I fainted.

So the moment that I was assigned for, I fainted. I had not seen that.

And in my family as well they were always taunting me. You know that you hate guns. You don't like fire. You, when there were you know, celebrated firings. I didn't like it. And also - and my family. So they were saying that you're, you know, you're too...

**Ramita Navai:** They would tease you.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah, they would tease me.

**Ramita Navai:** For being a scaredy cat?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yeah. Oh gosh they were perhaps right. Oh my God. What is really happening? I mean, and luckily I had my three people that...

**Ramita Navai:** So you fainted, you fell to the ground?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** No, I fainted and they got me. I think they felt it. I said with a shivering voice, I told them that I'm fainting and I fainted perhaps for a short moment and they...

**Ramita Navai:** Your friends propped you up?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** They just propped me up and also because they propped me up of course they covered the camera as well only and managed to take me out.

And that was my first, it had a failure and success. Success that I really got the camera and the failure was that I wasn't prepared. I was too young, perhaps I'd never seen it. I didn't even know what it meant to see an execution really from that distance. But, in a way, at least I passed the test that I could do other assignments that I managed to bravely get the camera in.

And that was the beginning of unfortunately what was not the last time I would go into that stadium Ramita. I went multiple times. Unfortunately, I didn't faint. I would say because I said I was not, I didn't like it to say I was desensitised, but I saw it. So that was the beginning. I saw it and then I went a couple of times without the camera. And then I went with a camera and unfortunately that was the practice there. And then I went to the frontlines, particularly north of Kabul, there were quite a lot of things, horrific things happening.

**Ramita Navai:** I mean Shoaib, the execution videos of the films that you did take, it can't be underestimated the effect they had.

It was the first time outsiders were seeing the Taliban's brutality up close because your execution films were broadcast around the world and they made headline news around the world.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes indeed.

**Ramita Navai:** How did that make you feel when you realized your videos had caused shockwaves around the world?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Well, in a way shall I be honest and say they make me feel good and bad. Good, well, of course you are - I was not and I'm still not an anti-Taliban person. Back then I was just there to tell the story and make the world judge. Definitely not a campaigner or a pro or against anything. So I feel good that I managed to do a story. In a way I also feel bad. I feel being part of telling a lot of those negativities happening in Afghanistan, that it took us years to repair the image of Afghanistan that we are not just people because of executions.

We're not just the host of that Osama bin Laden or terrorism. We are also just a nation with a rich history, with a lovely culture. Just a normal citizen, normal, lucky, like you would have your neighbour that they would love to have a family. They would love to watch football. They would love to believe in whatever they believe.

We all just like that. But because of a lot of those reportings, whatever was attached to us was a lot was terrorism.

And that was, we showed a lot of that to the world back then.

**Ramita Navai:** Yeah. I mean, Shoaib, I remember those videos. It was 1999, there's one video in particular, one film in particular, I remember, and it was of a woman being executed and that was haunting. And I understand what you're saying that, I guess you feel bad that you fed in to that narrative, that Afghanistan is full of murderous fundamentalists, but at the time it was being run by murderous fundamentalists.

At the time this was important work that you were doing, you were letting the world know what was happening because the world didn't know.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes. For me that first assignment wasn't even for the sake of the world. The story for me was to get into this world of journalism and then yes, afterwards I was going to really extreme ends and dangers because filming was forbidden and I was going to the frontline, to the actual frontline and film. I have seen and I have filmed so much that some of the footage that I still have, I think for security reasons, it's not shareable, but it's still I see it worth it, one day it's valuable, that will be used in the future.

So I do not regulate why I had gone to those extremes to really tell a story.

**Ramita Navai:** And Shoaib explain to me, were you going to those extremes, were you putting yourself in extreme danger to prove yourself as a journalist or were you doing that in order to get work or to what extent were you doing that because that was the story and you felt it was important to get that out?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I think, I felt that I had the abilities, the contacts, the knowledge of how to get into those places and do those stories. Yes, I wasn't really keen on doing a lot only on the frontlines.

Unfortunately, back then, it has slightly changed now with the digital world, that the frontline stories would sell. There was quite a lot of stories I could have done but wouldn't sell back then. So as an 18, late 19, I was the only breadwinner for the whole family. I had to do stories that would sell, but within those stories, I would still really, I was perhaps very, very few people that had the courage, the interest and enthusiasm, but also knew how to do it, contacts, the language.

And so had I not done, particularly the frontline stories, I can very firmly and proudly say that I was the only person, the only Afghan journalist that throughout 1999, 2000 and a bit of 2001 that was going to do Shamali frontline filming, how the fighting happened, how they fought, who were there, who the Afghan fighters, who these foreign fighters were, who they were as human beings, they had stories, they had -

they were - I could see them, they would tell me also a lot that some of them were some really like young, naive Afghans who had just grabbed a gun and sent there.

And not, like me, also not knowing the consequence of going into those danger zones as some of them as well. So for me as well, it was like every single day was like a degree or a university to go there. And, really not just tell a story, but also to learn...

**Ramita Navai:** Find out more about your country?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes, yes.

**Ramita Navai:** So you continue journalism, you continue to this day.

So there was the invasion. Then there was a new government, an American installed government, and the war continued. Explain to me what it's like living and working in a state of conflict.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Living - I'm just - I'm pausing because the way we have survived, we say Afghanistan, we are a resilient nation. Resilient doesn't mean that we just keep quiet and tolerate and tolerate and tolerate. So alongside we fight, our mothers fight through difficulties and looking after kids while there are showers of mortar and rockets all over.

These hero mothers and dads finding bread out of almost nowhere.

But resilient means because I remember we would go to bed having only one piece of bread for a 10 member family and my mother, and the fighting next door, and my mother would say, okay, go to bed, son, kids, "Baad az har taareeke roshaneest".

There's a light at the end of the tunnel. I strongly believed that, that little word of my mother shut every other negativity that no I would not get killed tomorrow. Will I be able to go to school tomorrow or not? And the same throughout the 20 years of fighting post 9/11 we lived with hope. It is difficult. Let's carry on. Let's fight. Let's change it. But the future always, I have always, even until now sitting in front of you, Ramita, Kabul being ruled by the Taliban and I will be in Kabul next week. I'm a super positive optimistic person because 40 years of war and God knows how long more, and you cannot just continue.

It is difficult, but in a difficult extreme situation, you just say, think positive, whatever you have, make the best of that. Come up, learn, cope and carry on. It has been constant learning, coping and carrying on to navigate and find a bit of happiness together and live with that and think positive next steps.

**Ramita Navai:** *Hello, it's Ramita Navai here. And thank you for listening to my show. I hope you agree that these stories are not only powerful but important. As I speak to some incredible journalists from around the world about what they've learned from*

*working in dangerous places and how it's changed their perspective it would be great to get your help in sharing their personal stories.*

*So please do spread the word and subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you get your podcasts. I hope you continue to be inspired by the series. And I look forward to you joining me for more episodes.*

What are the logistics of working in a conflict zone? So how do you keep safe? The day-to-day techniques of survival.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Well, it's not about having an armoured car, having a bulletproof jacket, and obviously in some instances when you're on the front line, of course you would need to have that as well.

But I would say one thing above so many other things that I explain is really trust your instinct as well. Listen to that, do not ignore that. But it's constant. The same situation, the same place that you were a week ago, you would, when you're going again, you really have to re-study, come up with mitigations and mitigations.

And I would say live with plan A plan B plan C. Cover story A, cover story B, cover story C. Things change. You have to be constantly updating your mitigations. If that's a bit vague, I would say that, okay, there is a risk there that's the frontline, you will go through route B. And what if route B is closed?

What if you're asked and stopped and asked who you are, how you are, why you're going there? You need to have an answer for that. The way your outfit should be from your shoes to your clothes and the way even you pack your camera inside there that can really save your life because whether you choose to go in a taxi, on a lorry, or by different means, it's just, even in the middle of fire, there's a way to navigate and work. As long as you really study it, it has its weaknesses, but you should not once you find it, rely on it constantly at a very last minute, also revisit it. And carry on.

**Ramita Navai:** I mean, your attention to detail is extraordinary because the advice you've given me, working in Afghanistan, we've talked about what shoes I should wear.

You know, what coat I should wear, what bag I should carry in order to blend in and fit in. And that really strikes me about you is that you're thinking of that constantly. How do you live with that? Because you live there. Do you ever drop your guard?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Well, just an example of once on a bumpy road in Southern Afghanistan, it was super bumpy. I was in a taxi, had blended in, had all those things ticked, looked so like a local, but it was, the driver who was so dangerous. I put on my seatbelt. I said, oh, this is so dangerous. And at checkpoint they stopped.

They let everyone go. And they told the driver that I think you're smuggling a human being. In a taunting teasing way. And I didn't know, they meant me the person who loves his life and they knew because I didn't blend in just by the little mistake of, I shouldn't have put on my seat! **[Shoaib laughs]**

**Ramita Navai:** You know Shoaib, that's so funny because, as you know, I was recently in Afghanistan and health and safety.

I was insisting, everybody wears a seatbelt. And our driver said to me, I can't wear a seatbelt. If I wear a seatbelt, the checkpoint, they're going to pull us over. They're going to think it's so strange. **[Ramita laughs]** So I let him get away with not wearing a seatbelt. And you're absolutely right. It's these tiny details that can give you away.

But what I want to know is that, you know, how do you switch off from that? Because you go back home to Kabul, people know where you live, you live the story. How do you switch off? How do you disconnect? How do you separate the story from your everyday life?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I tell my fellow journalists who are, like you, visiting Afghanistan, that yes, of course, you are brave and you do those stories. But if you survive the 15 or 20 days, then you're good and you go away. But we live there. We live, it's pre-production, post production and post broadcast.

The more dangerous period is not after you're done, you have done the story and it goes to broadcast. It's particularly after it's broadcast that you live with fear of what will happen.

**Ramita Navai:** It's when the dust has settled often isn't it?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Exactly. Yes.

**Ramita Navai:** When you're expecting it the least.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes. And even there have been some very good films that until now I feel so bad. Because of its consequences after broadcast, I never wanted a credit for it, even to be in the end credits because you're there and the people attached to you are there. So you have to be kind to those around you, to immediate family members and yourself as well. And you need to be going to the gym. You need to go and buy your bread.

It's not always that you're protected when you're travelling. So you're too exposed. There are still too many weak points that mean you could be hurt or attacked. But you live with it. And even around that, you have to mitigate unfortunately. You don't, you buy bread from the same bakery that you do every day because...

**Ramita Navai:** So even living your everyday life like buying bread from the bakery, you have to be careful and change your routes?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I do that. Unfortunately I lost one of my very dearest colleagues who, that day, was on his bicycle with some bread back home. So it is not that somebody may get hurt while on duty.

Once you have all these things attached to you, it lives with you. The threat...

**Ramita Navai:** What happened to your colleague?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Well, he was on his way home on a bicycle. Two people on motorbike came, stop and showered him with bullets.

**Ramita Navai:** So this was a targeted execution?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** It was a targeted execution and on a relaxed sunny day that he had just bought the piece of bread to go home and have with his family.

So unfortunately, the risks and threats.

**Ramita Navai:** Are you scared of that?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I will be wrong if I'm not scared of that, because if you're not scared then you do not come up with mitigations and you're a reckless person, I would say. So fear is there. Of course. And the fear causes you to think of mitigations. How to live safely and securely. What measures you have to put in place.

I think every profession, but particularly this one really has a high bar of risks and threats. And - the downside with this though is that, I mean, I hope my wife doesn't listen to this podcast. You do not reflect that fear to the family because in Afghan culture, and maybe in every culture, the family members, particularly kids, hope is tied to the mother and father and the wife's whole hope is tied to the husband. And you don't want them to know that you are too vulnerable. You are too fragile. You really have to appear strong. And that, that is the difficult bit. That it is good if you could share a bit of that fear with someone.

**Ramita Navai:** You have to suppress the fear you live with?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes. Yes.

**Ramita Navai:** Shoaib, can you tell me about the threats you've received?

This is a difficult one. I understand for security reasons. **[Shoaib laughs]**

Okay. I guess you can't go into detail, but I guess what we can say, can we, is that you have always lived with death threats? This is a way of life for you.



**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes. I mean, it just happened one of the days that - I'm just giving an examples of you get the signs. Six months ago, just a month before the Taliban, Kabul was experiencing its peak of target killing. Journalists were one of them and particularly me leading a big team of journalists in Afghanistan. And that was the extreme days of literally living with fear. And that day just happened that I decided at the very last moment that I would work from home. And it was at the beginning of the meeting that a bomb went off right in front of the gate of our block.

And I jumped up to the window, saw that, for a moment I saw that the car I drove was blown into pieces, same colour. And I said, oh my God, I thought my wife had taken the car and I almost had a heart attack. And my son rushed in and said, no, no, no, no. Mom is at my auntie's place. Realized that the same colour, same model of car was hit.

And a lot of these sort of fears and incidents happen. You're so close. You're so close to that. Some of these threats are we jokingly say that they never call you to say, Hey, I'm going to kill you. They really try. So don't wait for that call and live.

Exactly live. My advice for some of my friends is like live as if somebody is really tracking you. I'm not saying live always with fear. I'm just saying enjoy your life, but watch around as well. Be vigilant. I'm just saying, be vigilant. Don't have a fearful life because at the end of the day, you really need to enjoy that cup of coffee and cup of tea.

So don't live with fear, but please simply...

**Ramita Navai:** Always in the back of your mind?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** Yes, it is always in the back of your mind. Yeah.

**Ramita Navai:** Shoaib, how do you maintain your integrity when you're in physical danger and you're under pressure from numerous factions, not to report certain stories when you know that you're getting threats and you're going to continue getting death threats?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I think this is really difficult for local journalists when you are based there for the sake of your contacts. So you live there, they know where you live and also you need access to some stories. And, to a certain extent you could have tea with one party or one side or faction. But you always have your red line and there will be times they expect you - you interview them they expect you that you're not going to ask them difficult questions. And you are aware of that. So this is the part, when you have your relationship with your contacts, you have to go and meet and have tea and be certain, get together.

It is very good to give them that understanding to educate them while you're having tea that the country needs. What does it mean being objective? And it is also an asset for Afghanistan if they have objective journalists and it doesn't mean enmity. I



think the best of you try - I found that if you really educate them, that if I am really critical, that I'm not an anti at all, I'm just, my profession requires me to challenge you and give you the floor to respond.

But if I'm not putting your propaganda on, if I'm not just closing my eyes for a while, while you say it doesn't mean I'm your enemy. I think you have to make the other party understand that you're just, you're required by your profession. And if they'll see that all the other side is also reflected. And as long as I believe, I always say to my friends, Hey, believe me, if you really stick to the values of journalism and one of which says fairness. That you do not really have, if you try to give the other party a right of reply, or you just say things that will really make your story fair, that it doesn't smell that you really have intentionally tried to attack one side or the other to some extent you're safe.

**Ramita Navai:** I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but you push the boundaries, I think, like few other journalists I know because you live under constant risk, threat and pressure. But you feel that you can talk your way out of it often.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I strongly believe in that.

**Ramita Navai:** I mean, you're a master at it and you have talked your way out of many difficult situations.

And is that kind of how you operate in order to not censor yourself?

**Shoaib Sharifi:** I think, yes, it is particularly, it is that very first conversation. It's at that checkpoint the way you even say hello. So which tone you have to judge who is at that checkpoint, how you would say hello, how you would appear too much of a joker, that would be a problem, or show too much of seriousness and how you really communicate.

Because on the other side, they are not robots, they're human beings and they will have their anger. They would also have their humour. And if you are really - unsure, you really need to be fully loaded with context and of the area you're going. If it is Afghanistan overall, and if it's a particular area of Afghanistan, you really should know the context, the culture, the sensitivities, the strengths, the weaknesses, and then you can, find your way out.

**Ramita Navai:** Now Shoaib, you've faced death many times in your work, but I want to ask you about the one moment that you were convinced that you were going to die. It was December, 2009. You're covering a story about the Taliban and you had travelled to Kunar province in Eastern Afghanistan. Talk me through the start of your day.

**Shoaib Sharifi:** It was a day, it was a beautiful sunny day and, like many other things, I'm sitting in front of you starting to confess on so many fronts. One of which, when I used to go to difficult and dangerous places, I didn't tell them to my mother or

my wife, until I return, because they would really feel bad and I didn't want them to worry.

It is hard to convince my wife and my mother that look, I'm not a reckless person. I'm just putting some mitigation there if I'm going to the frontline. So instead of that, I would say I'm going to X, instead of going to Y. I often mentioned that I was going to a peaceful part of Afghanistan when I had gone that day to Kunar, which the Americans had tagged as the valley of death.

So I had gone to really see there was a new wave of fighting. Obama had just deployed 30,000 troops and wanted to see how it reflected back on the Taliban. I received a call from my wife, said, Where you are? And I said, well, you know, I am in a very comfortable, lovely place. So I told you, and she said, I had a bad dream go home. Now! I said, look, don't trust dreams. She said, no, go and sit next to your mom now, because I had a horrible dream. Something happened to you. I said, okay, I will.

30 minutes after that call. I was taken by the Taliban.

**Ramita Navai:** We will continue Shoaib's remarkable story of being kidnapped by the Taliban on the next episode of **The Line of Fire**. It's one you won't want to miss.

In the meantime, if you want to learn more about Shoaib's work, I suggest watching his Bafta-nominated documentary called *My Childhood, My Country: 20 years in Afghanistan*. It's an extraordinary piece of work filmed over two decades. Shoaib follows a boy called Mir, while charting the evolution of his country since 9/11. You can watch it on ITV online. Shoaib's Twitter handle is @shoaibsharifi1

Thank you for listening to this episode of **The Line of Fire**. If you'd like to follow me, my Twitter handle is at @RamitaNavai.

And if you've enjoyed this episode, review, and subscribe. And tell your friends they can find us wherever they get their podcasts.

Until next time.

**The Line of Fire** is a podcast from *Aurra Studios*.

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