

Pakistan border journalists need conflict training **By Zafar Iqbal**

At first glance, Mumtaz Sadiq looks like a [Taliban](#) commander with his long disheveled beard and traditional [Swati cap](#).



For those meeting him for the first time there is no indication that he has been a severe critic of the Taliban regime and an upholder and tireless campaigner for freedom of expression in the area.

He is accustomed to regular attacks and intimidation.



Ransacked newsroom

In recent years two of his journalist colleagues have been killed during the ongoing fighting and explosives have been fired at his offices, causing widespread damage and halting the print run.

Sadiq, 45, is a publisher attempting to cover and deliver local news in the [Swat Valley](#) in the [North-West Frontier Province](#) of [Pakistan](#).

Sadiq started his journalistic career by launching a local magazine in 1988 entitled “The voice of [Malakand](#)” in a remote area of [Pakistan](#) and at a time when journalistic activities were restricted to the big cities.

Sadiq was concerned that those living in the outlying areas of the country were being deprived of regular local, national and international news.

These areas were also rarely covered by the national press.

Through focusing on in-depth coverage of local affairs and issues, his weekly Urdu magazine grew in popularity and soon became a daily newspaper, the [Daily Azadi](#), (which means daily freedom).

This was followed by another [Urdu](#) daily, the “Khabar Kar”.

Passion for journalism

Resting his elbows on a table piled high with newspapers and press releases, Sadiq traces his passion for journalism back to his childhood when he used to read newspapers in the local barber shop.

The cost of newspapers, along with distribution problems, meant that people in the rural areas of Pakistan had to get their information from newspapers and magazines left in public places, such as restaurants and tea stalls.

The young Sadiq decided that he would publish his own newspaper in his home town in order to meet the need of local people for trusted information.

At that point he was totally unaware of the dangers that face a journalist working in a developing country such as Pakistan, and the pressures, threats and intimidation he would face in his chosen vocation.



Daily Azadi

Today, the Daily Azadi has a circulation of 50,000 copies, but Sadiq's local and regional newspaper businesses continue to be hit financially by government and Taliban decisions to try to block advertisements being placed in his newspapers.

[Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam](#) , a pro-Taliban Islamist party in Pakistan (which has become a critic of the Daily Azadi) is behind one of those bans.

Sadiq sees both the Taliban and the [ISI \(Inter-Services Intelligence\)](#) - the Pakistani secret agency - as major hindrances to media freedom in an area where even the slightest criticism can have a dire impact on journalists.

He lists numerous incidents where he, and those working for him in his offices or in the field, have faced investigations, intimidation, and attacks.

He says it is a pattern that is having a disastrous impact on the press and those living in the area who are increasingly denied reliable and trustworthy news coverage.

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“One day 25 security men forced their way into the office of my newspaper and occupied it overnight. As a result the newspaper could not be published the following day,” he said.

Sadiq says Taliban leaders will regularly visit his newspaper's office and threaten staff if they publish something that is perceived to be critical. Such threats are serious and have resulted in the death of two of Sadiq's reporters, Abdul Aziz and Muhammad Shahid.

Hostile environment training needed



Destroyed newspaper offices
Sadiq blames the Taliban for an attack on his regional office.

He says explosives were used and the premises were destroyed.

After that attack he decided to move his publications to [Islamabad](#).

However Sadiq still has more than 40 reporters and other staff working in northern Pakistan where their lives are at risk as fierce fighting continues.

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Internally displaced persons

The fighting has resulted in an estimated three million people leaving Swat and [Malakand](#), but Sadiq says he is determined to continue to serve those who are left in the region.

He is also concerned about informing the [IDPs \(internally displaced persons\)](#), those who are forced to flee their homes but remain within the country's borders



The frontier region of Pakistan, picture courtesy of Steve Evans
“These people are our real asset and we can not leave them alone; we will do whatever we can to help them,” vows Sadiq.

His challenge in this environment is to continue to do so in a way that protects his staff who are risking their lives and in a way that is economically viable as those who oppose a free press do all they can to diminish its reach and impact.

Note: This is an edited version of a piece submitted by freelance journalist and media activist, [Zafar Iqbal](#). All images courtesy Saeed Ur Rehman, except the image of Swat Valley which is courtesy of Steve Evans.

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