

# Taliban takeover

## Charlotte Bellis faces perils outside ‘enemy territory’

**Commentary:** New Zealand-born Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Peter Arnett was one of a handful of journalists allowed to stay in Baghdad as the American offensive against Iraq began in 1991. Reporting first from the rooftop of the Al-Rashid Hotel, he chronicled—literally—the impact of the bombing campaign. But on Day Four he was taken to a bombed-out building in a suburb that was then an infant milk formula factory, but which would later gain notoriety thanks to investigative reporter Seymour Hersh—Abu Ghraib. His report was accurate. In 2003, Arnett was once again in ‘enemy territory’ and (by his own later admission, unwisely) gave an interview to Iraqi television during the Second Iraq War. In the interview, he stated that the civilian casualties inflicted by the Coalition forces were counterproductive. In August 2021, it was the turn of another New Zealand journalist, Charlotte Bellis reporting for Al Jazeera English, to tell us what she saw. And much of the world has now seen her. The author examines the pitfalls that she may face.

**Keywords:** Abu Ghraib, Afghanistan, Al Jazeera, credibility, foreign correspondence, gender, human rights, Iraq, New Zealand, Taliban, truth, war correspondence

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I HAD a flashback to another New Zealand foreign correspondent as I watched Al Jazeera journalist Charlotte Bellis reporting on the entry of the Taliban into Kabul (Ellis, 2021). My mind went back 30 years to the bombing of Baghdad when another New Zealand journalist, Peter Arnett, reported nightly amid the thunder and flash of bombs and anti-aircraft fire.

Bellis has not had to face the same pyrotechnics, but Taliban firing their AK-47s into the air can be just as deadly if they alter their aim. However, that was not the comparison that came into my mind. I was reminded of the perils of reporting from ‘enemy territory’.

Arnett was one of a handful of journalists allowed to stay in Baghdad as the American offensive against Iraq began in 1991. Reporting first from the rooftop of the Al-Rashid Hotel, he chronicled—quite literally—the impact of the bombing campaign. But on Day Four he was taken to a bombed-out building in a

suburb that would later gain notoriety thanks to investigative reporter Seymour Hersh—Abu Ghraib (Hersh, 2004).

In 1991, the suburb was home to a factory which, according to Iraqi officials, had been the sole source of infant milk formula in Iraq. Arnett toured what remained of the building, parts of which were ankle-deep in white powder, and took some intact sachets for the children at his hotel.

His report that night of the destruction of the baby-milk plant provoked a furious response from the Pentagon, the White House and even Congress. The plant, they stated, had manufactured chemical weapons and, in the words of representative Laurence Coughlin of Pennsylvania, Arnett had become ‘the Joseph Goebbels of Saddam Hussein’s Hitler-like regime’ (Arnett, 2003).

In 1995, Saddam Hussein’s son-in-law defected and confirmed that Iraq’s biological weapons programme was centred on Al Hakam, 96 kilometres south-west of Baghdad, and at three other facilities, but did not include the baby milk factory (Schwartz, 2015). Arnett’s report had been accurate.

In 2003, Arnett was once again in ‘enemy territory’ and (by his own later admission, unwisely) gave an interview to Iraqi television during the Second Iraq War. In the interview he stated that the civilian casualties inflicted by the Coalition forces were counterproductive and that he had been telling Americans about the determination of the Iraqis to oppose the invasion. Those home truths cost him his job with NBC (Cozens, 2003).

He had done no more than follow the philosophy he established during a Pulitzer Prize-winning period covering the Vietnam War: Report what you see. It may have led to character assassination by those in power, but it also earned enduring accolades from his peers.

Now it is the turn of Charlotte Bellis to tell us what she sees.

And much of the world has now seen her.

She was one of only three women permitted to attend the Taliban’s first media conference in Kabul in 20 years on 17 August 2021 and she asked the first question. This female journalist—whose striking blue eyes and blonde hair marked her as a foreign non-believer in spite of the hijab she wore—cut to the chase: ‘There is a lot of concern whether women will be able to work, that girls will be still be able to go to school. What assurances can you give to women and girls that their rights will be protected?’

It took real courage for a woman to ask the question, given the Taliban’s track record. That part of the media conference was broadcast around the world.

Bellis had already given Al Jazeera viewers insights into the overwhelming of the capital, reporting on rag-tag units’ entry into the city and trying to verify reports of human rights abuses in territory already occupied by the Taliban. Her reports from the chaos of Kabul International Airport were made against a backdrop of surging people and gunmen firing their weapons into the air as a form of crowd control.



Figure 1: Charlotte Bellis reporting live from Kabul for Al Jazeera English.

In a sit-down interview after the press conference with Abdul Qahar Balkhi, an articulate fluent English speaker from the Taliban’s Cultural Commission, she continued to pursue the issue of human rights. The responses, like the response to her question at the media conference, sounded like the voice of sweet reason and compromise. He even praised New Zealand for providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

It was part of what has been termed the Taliban’s charm offensive, which Western commentators and officials have condemned as disingenuous.

Bellis will continue to report what the Taliban say, and that is exactly what she should do. She has demonstrated that she is unafraid in the questions she poses, and the answers she receives will give insights into how Afghanistan’s returned rulers will govern, conduct themselves, and control their radical elements (or not).

She will run risks.

She may work for an Arab-owned media network, but she is a New Zealander. Her country had fought against the Taliban, which could see her treated as hostile if revenge-seeking extremists hold power. She will also tread a difficult path in her dealings with a group of men whose core belief places women well out of the public eye and on a different intellectual plane. For now, however, she seems safe and there is a reason (to which I will return).

She may not, however, be safe from the same Western forces that confronted Peter Arnett.



**Figure 2: Charlotte Bellis: reporting with empathy and nuance.**

Let me paint a couple of scenarios: The evacuation of refugees suffers a catastrophic failure that is the fault of the United States or its allies, and the Taliban tell Bellis ‘where the blame lies’. Or, the Taliban present Bellis with what they claim is evidence of abuses by US or allied troops during their occupation of Afghanistan.

Under either scenario, she would need only to report what she saw and what the Taliban said in order to face the same sort of peril that Arnett faced in the 1991 Gulf War. He, too, was simply reporting what he saw and heard. He was the victim of a default position by politicians and the military in times of conflict: If you’ve been banged to rights, shoot the messenger.

I am certain that this particular danger will no more stop Bellis than it did Arnett. She has a track record and an employer that should protect her reputation.

She gave an insight into her latest assignment and her approach to her role during an interview with *New Zealand Herald* journalist Kurt Bayer (2021). Here is a short excerpt that shows why the invitation to that media conference was not sheer luck and why she can be relied on to report impartially what she sees.

It took just 10 days from the first city falling to the capital Kabul succumbing to Taliban control.

Bellis was right in the thick of the action. Years of journalistic legwork was paying off.

Based in Doha, where political negotiations have been ongoing for the past three years, she's slowly become a familiar face and got to know some of the Taliban's political leadership key players, who are also headquartered in the Qatari capital.

Over time, they'd started to trust each other.

'The Taliban are painted as a bunch of brutal, medieval terrorists but at the top there are some people who are quite moderate, progressive and rational,' Bellis says.

'So it's easier to have a relationship with those types of people, who are more relatable and are happy to talk and have a dynamic conversation.'

She would meet them for tea, even have some around to her house, where they would have open discussions.

'I'd say, "What's the game plan for this? How do you plan for that? In the West, that's not going to fly if you do this, and if you want progress, you won't be able to do that, people won't put up with it."

'And they would take that and ask what I would suggest. They are actually open to conversations about trying to make Afghanistan better. That's not to say there aren't brutal, medieval killers within the organisation, there are. But it's not blanket.' (Bayer, 2021)

Charlotte Bellis did the groundwork, established contacts, and gained a level of trust over time. That puts her in a far better position to report on the Taliban than many of the remaining Western journalists in Kabul. The interview with Abdul Qahar Balkhi suggests she will also be granted interviews with senior members of the movement.

But don't be surprised to see her labelled the Joseph Goebbels of the Taliban's Hitler-like regime when she simply follows Arnett's dictum of reporting what she sees. And don't be surprised when, like her predecessor, she continues to do just that.

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