

## *A Girl's Heroic Battle Against the Taliban Was Also a Family Feud*

A teenage Afghan girl was celebrated for killing Taliban who attacked her home. But the story of her heroism is steeped in pain, and reveals the complicated crosscurrents of the Afghan War.

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July 22, 2020

The teenage girl was the hero of a night of carnage that left her family's hillside home in western Afghanistan strewn with bodies. Qamar Gul, 15, fought to her last bullet, gunning down Taliban attackers who raided the house and killed her father and mother.

In the days after the attack last week, Afghan social media was full of slick posters celebrating her as "My Hero." Some users compared her to the Kurdish women of Kobani, Syria, who fought the Islamic State. Local officials put out pictures of Qamar Gul posing with her rifle. Afghanistan's vice president praised her for defending against "the enemies of the nation."

But the story of her heroism is steeped in pain, in a culture that often treats women as property, and in the confusion of an Afghan war that has twisted families into knots of complex loyalties and feuds.

One of the attackers she killed was her own husband, who was fighting on the Taliban's side and apparently seeking her forcible return after a falling out with Ms. Gul's family, according to relatives and local officials.

As the war in Afghanistan drags on, the violence has increasingly become local. Beyond the headlines of the major clashes between government forces and Taliban militants often lies a more complicated reality of local power rivalries, of a tug of war between mafia groups and drug-dealing rings, and of communities and families torn apart.

Increasingly, both the pro-government and Taliban side are drawing on the same pools of local fighters.

In villages and rural districts, the Taliban are not an unknown force — they are mostly the sons and brothers and husbands everyone there knows. And the Afghan government has in large stretches of the country found itself relying on tens of thousands of local militiamen, called the Public Uprising, to try to hold territory. They often bear the brunt of the fighting, but their casualties rarely make it to official records of the toll of the war on Afghan forces.

Ghor Province, where the incident happened, has remained restive in recent years and proved particularly brutal for women. In government-controlled areas, girls have been bartered for dowries at a young age. Graphic videos of stoning and flogging have repeatedly come out of the Taliban-controlled areas.

The village in Taiwara district where Qamar Gul's home was raided lies on the edge, near where government control gives way to the Taliban. But the family's fate had intertwined with violence long before the recent battle.



This photograph, made available by the Ghor district government, shows Qamar Gul, who fought off Taliban attackers who killed her mother and father. Ghor District Government

Qamar Gul's mother, Fatima, had married twice before ending up with her father, Shah Gul Rahimi, according to Zabihullah Rahmani, a relative. Fatima's first husband died young of an overdose while working as a laborer in Iran, leaving behind a son who is now a police officer. Her second marriage to a local commander was short-lived: He was killed in clashes with the Taliban in the 1990s. Shah Gul, the local commander's younger brother, stepped in to marry Fatima. They had two children together, Qamar Gul, and her 12-year-old brother Habibullah.

In recent years, Mr. Rahimi, who was just 40, took on his brother's responsibilities as a community elder in Taiwara. He frequently helped with the Local Uprising militia fending off Taliban attacks, joining them in their battles. But it wasn't clear whether he was also on a government payroll — the militias are paid anywhere between \$50 to \$150 by the Afghan intelligence agency and provided ammunition — or whether he was just helping in his role as a local elder.

Residents described him as a stalwart fighter, despite having had one hand amputated years before.

About four years ago, Mr. Rahimi struck an agreement with a local man from an adjacent village named Mohamed Naeem: Mr. Naeem would marry Mr. Rahimi's daughter, Qamar, as his second wife. In exchange, Mr. Rahimi would take Mr. Naeem's teenage niece as his second wife.

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Since both girls were young, they waited two years before making the marriage official in separate wedding ceremonies. Mr. Naeem and Mr. Rahimi had grown so close that when Mr. Naeem needed a loan of about \$3,000, Mr. Rahimi became his guarantor at a business that gave him the loan.

"Naeem was his son-in-law, and they got along very well too," said Sebghatullah, Mr. Rahimi's nephew. "It all turned upside down at once."

Just how Mr. Naeem joined the Taliban is not exactly clear. But relatives and local officials said it happened over the course of the past two years, as his private life started falling apart and he was chased for his debts.

Mr. Naeem, who had taken his new bride to his old home, right away got into arguments with his parents over how unfairly he treated his first wife by spending all his time with the younger Qamar Gul, said the relative, Mr. Rahmani. After one fight, Mr. Naeem took Qamar Gul and left, first staying with his in-laws and then moving his home to neighboring Helmand Province, a Taliban stronghold.

### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

"He swore that he would never return to his own village," said Abdullah, Qamar Gul's maternal uncle. "Naeem lived with his father-in-law for a while, he was given a room at the house. But the people he owed money to now kept knocking on his father-in-law's door."



A pro-government militia fighter keeps watch at Taiwara district center after a Taliban raid in 2017. Mujib Mashal/The New York Times

The trouble seems to have begun when Mr. Rahimi's new wife visited her family and refused to return to her husband, saying she didn't want to live with him, according to the two relatives. In return, when Qamar Gul came home, her father held her until the family returned his wife and Mr. Naeem paid the \$3,000 debt for which Mr. Rahimi was being harassed. After several rounds of mediation with local elders, Mr. Rahimi agreed a compromise: He would let Qamar Gul return only if Mr. Naeem paid the debt.

"Naeem's niece wasn't happy with the marriage because Shah Gul was much older than her. But Qamar Gul wasn't arguing much — she said she was OK with whatever her father had decided, but that Naeem had to pay back the debt," Mr. Rahmani said.

But Mr. Naeem had other thoughts: He had grown close to a ruthless Taliban commander in Ghor who would help him take Qamar Gul home without paying any money. They chose the early hours after midnight on July 17 for a surprise attack, with about a dozen of their fighters surrounding the hillside home and barging in.

When Mr. Rahimi had come out of the hallway to see what was happening, he was given no chance to run for his weapon. He had six bullet wounds, including one in the neck. When Qamar Gul's mother, Fatima, came out to cry for help after her husband was shot, she was also shot, three times — twice in her chest, once also in the neck, family members said.

Qamar Gul grabbed her father's weapon, ran to the doorway, and began spraying at the attackers in the yard. She shot two of them dead, and wounded the senior Taliban commander. The Taliban fled the scene as neighbors and local militia fighters began arriving.

Two days after the attack, the Ghor provincial governor put out a statement saying Qamar Gul and her 12-year old brother had defeated an "offensive attack" by the "Taliban terrorist group" and forced the "bloodthirsty Taliban to flee, leaving behind two of their dead in the battlefield."

The statement attached graphic photos of two bodies. One was Mr. Naeem, Qamar Gul's husband, the chest of his embroidered tunic soaked in blood.