

After Airport Bombing, an Afghan Family Buries a Father, and Hope

The former police officer, from the Hazara ethnic minority, had hoped to help his family escape the Taliban. Instead, he is now numbered among the scores killed at the Kabul airport.

By Matthieu Aikins Photographs by Victor J. Blue For The New York Times

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KABUL, Afghanistan — In a shed beside the mosque his father had helped to build, Hussein's body lay on a marble slab on Friday morning as his brother Hamid and other relatives washed him for burial. Delicately, they patched the shrapnel wounds that had killed him the day before, using bits of cotton and plaster, and clear plastic tape.

Neighbors and relatives appeared in the doorway, watching and offering advice; in this township on the outskirts of Kabul, people are buried in the same way a child is raised, as a common affair.

"We all went together to the airport a few days ago," said Jamil, 28, one of Hussein's seven brothers. Jamil had worked for an American N.G.O., and had applied for a U.S. visa. Hussein, the oldest, had been a police officer who had worked with U.S. Special Forces; Hamid, the second-oldest, was an army major who had served alongside the Americans in Helmand Province.



Family members preparing Hussein's body for burial.

All three felt they and their families' lives were in danger with the Taliban in power again, especially since they belonged to the Hazara Shiite minority. Three days ago, Hussein had brought his wife and five children to the airport, but the Taliban had driven them back.

"They were beating us with whips and cables and firing in the air," said his wife, Mahera, 35. "I was afraid for the children."

Yet her husband was desperate to escape. The couple decided that if he could get into the airport, perhaps he could find a way to bring the rest of the family inside safely. She told their son Ruhullah, 16, to accompany his father because he spoke some English.

The father and son were among the thousands of Afghans who went to the airport on Thursday in the final days of the U.S. evacuation, hoping to get through Taliban checkpoints and crowds, despite warnings of a plot by the Islamic State to attack the airport.



"Oh, God, why did you leave us?" his wife, Mahera, cried. "Why?" Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Hussein's brother Hamid, the army officer, went with them, but he said they got separated in the dense crowd as they approached Abbey Gate, where Marines were checking documents and allowing entry to a select few. The airport's fortress architecture of blast walls and barbed wire, designed to deter car bombs and complex attacks, had funneled the crowd into a narrow choke point beside the canal.

It was there the bomber struck.

"The blast hit us and knocked us down," Hamid said. "There were bodies everywhere. I could hardly see anything, we were choking on dust and smoke. I couldn't find the others, and I had to escape."



A van bearing Hussein's body leaving for burial.

When she heard the news of a blast at the airport, Mahera tried calling her husband and son, but their phones were off. At dawn, she took her eldest son with her and went into the city to join the procession of relatives combing through the hospital's morgues for missing loved ones, charnel houses that had filled with the nearly 200 Afghans killed in the blast.

"It was terrifying. The bodies were missing heads and limbs. There were men, women and children," Mahera said. Finally, she found her husband's corpse in a hospital in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood of Kabul.

"The earth and sky trembled, and I fell down," she said. "All of our dreams turned to dust."

Yet Friday morning brought mercy as well. While Hussein's body was being washed at the mosque on Friday, Ruhullah, the missing son, arrived. He sat down on the steps near the outbuilding, the right side of his face bruised and swollen from the blast. He had just learned that his father was dead.

"A group of us were stuck inside the canal at the airport all night," the teenager said, dazed. "Every time we tried to get up, the Americans started shouting and shooting."



Ruhullah, Hussein's son, at the burial site. After his father was killed, Ruhullah endured a terrifying night. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

At first light, the Taliban arrived and drove the group away from the airport with whips, he said. Still wet with sewage, Ruhullah had walked until he found a bus that took him across the city. “He just got here,” said Jamil, his uncle, who was watching nearby. “He’s been missing until now.”

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When Hussein’s body was ready and wrapped in a white shroud, his relatives and neighbors carried him into the mosque, where the mullah was waiting. They laid him in a green blanket at the front, his face exposed. “God is great,” they chanted between prayers, five times, as prescribed by Shiite custom.

Most of the men filed out. It was the women’s turn to see the deceased. They parted the curtain separating their side of the mosque, and Hussein’s wife began weeping loudly as she approached. “Oh, God, why did you leave us?” Mahera wailed, staggering. “Why?”

At the edge of the room, Ruhullah, hearing his mother, crouched and began to cry for the first time.

Outside the mosque, a small convoy of vehicles had assembled. After the women had said goodbye, his kinsmen carried out Hussein’s body and placed it in a van. The mourners drove out of the township, and into the hills overlooking Kabul.



Family and friends of Hussein at the burial site.

"We all looked up to him," said Jamil, staring out the window. "He was a police officer but he never stole or took bribes. He served with honor, until the day that they sold him out. The police, army, special forces — our leaders sold all of them out."

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.

Clusters of graves were visible on the hillsides, many of them bearing the tricolor flags of the fallen government. "Most of my classmates and playmates, the boys my age, are dead," Jamil said. "They went into the police or army, or worked logistics for the Americans. I was the only one who stayed in school and went to university."

When they reached the site, the mourners got down and walked up the barren slope, eddies of dust licking at the cuffs of their pants. A pair of gravediggers were swinging their picks into the stony ground; there were graves already dug farther up the hill, but the family wanted to bury Hussein here next to his father, the family patriarch, who had died of Covid two months earlier, during the third wave of the virus in Afghanistan.

The mourners crouched in the sun, waiting; in the distance, the roar of a departing American military jet could be heard. Seeing a foreign journalist, some of the men asked if there was still any way to get into the airport and leave the country.

They represented the war's losing side: those who had sacrificed for a fallen system, who would find their share diminished in the new order to come, and at their former enemy's mercy. They did not believe the bloodshed had ended.

"We don't trust what the Taliban is saying about forgiving everyone," one man said. "That's just words."



Some of Hussein's family. "There's no value in our lives," Jamil said. "Our blood isn't worth anything. No one cares."

Two of Hussein's relatives held up a sheet to shield his body from the hot sun; it rippled as the breeze came in small, merciful gusts. Among the Afghan security forces, there had been a popular saying in Farsi that Hussein would have been familiar with: ya watan, ya kafan. Give me the nation, or the shroud.

"When the Taliban came to Kabul, I cried for my country, more than I cried for our father," Jamil said. "The army, the police, everything we built, it's all gone now."

Once a wider pit was dug, the gravediggers hacked a trench into the hard soil at the bottom, pointing toward Mecca. Jamil helped ease his brother into the grave. The mullah crouched beside him and read a prayer, asking for God to show mercy on his soul. They rose and covered Hussein with pieces of slate, and then the stones with shovelfuls of dirt.

When it was done, the mourners came down the hill, tears and sweat running through the dust on their faces.

"There's no value in our lives," Jamil said. "Our blood isn't worth anything. No one cares."

Fatima Faizi contributed reporting.