

First Tied to ISIS, Then to U.S.: Family in Drone Strike Is Tarnished Twice

The U.S. admission that a drone strike that killed 10 civilians was a “tragic mistake” did nothing to ease the sense of vulnerability among surviving family members and co-workers living under Taliban rule.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Pentagon’s admission of having made a “tragic mistake” in the killing of an Afghan aid worker, and seven children from his extended family in a drone strike, added one more incident to the long, grievous list of U.S. military mistakes in Afghanistan.

But for the Afghan family it devastated, and for the co-workers of the targeted man, Zemari Ahmadi, the American apology did nothing to ease their sense of vulnerability in the new Taliban order. If anything, their fears and feelings of exposure have only increased.

Emal Ahmadi, the brother of Zemari Ahmadi, described his family as having been tarnished twice over: first by being suspected by the United States of being linked to the Islamic State in Khorasan, a branch of ISIS that is active in Afghanistan and is an enemy of the Taliban.

And second because it has now been revealed that his brother worked for an American aid organization — a fact that only became widely known after the drone strike.

“There’s a big threat against us, now that everyone knows that he was working for the Americans,” Emal Ahmadi said. “But we had no choice but to tell the media, so that the world would believe” that the family was not connected to the Islamic State, he said.

The Pentagon launched the strike from a Reaper drone on Aug. 29, barely 48 hours before the last U.S. soldier withdrew from Afghanistan. Before the attack, the U.S. military had been tracking a vehicle believed to be connected to the Islamic State and whose driver was thought to be preparing a bomb.

In fact, the car belonged to Mr. Ahmadi, an aid worker, who was going about his daily work for a Pasadena, Calif.-based food charity. When he returned home, the missile struck, killing 10 people, seven of them children.

That the Americans tied this target to ISIS posed a serious threat to family members and close associates because the Taliban treat the Islamic State as mortal enemies and have been in competition with them for fighters and influence in Afghanistan for the past three years. So the Ahmadi family was eager to erase any thought that they might be connected to the extremist group.

While the United States is no longer seen as a battlefield enemy of the Taliban in the way that it was before the militants effectively took over the Afghan government on Aug. 15, the Taliban still view any American nonprofit groups operating in the country with deep suspicion.

In trying to clear the family name of connections to ISIS, it was revealed that Nutrition and Education International, or NEI, Mr. Ahmadi’s employer, was preparing the paperwork to make it possible for him to emigrate with his family to the United States.

The Pentagon’s admission of error, which came after insisting for more than two weeks that the attack was warranted, was broadcast Saturday on Afghan television. As part of their coverage, Afghan news channels showed images of the Ahmadi home as his surviving family members held up photos for reporters of the children they had lost in the blast, including a girl of 2.

The Pentagon's deeper review of the strike followed a New York Times investigation casting doubt on Mr. Ahmadi's connection to ISIS and on any explosives being in his vehicle. The military concluded that there had been a series of mistakes that culminated in the deadly strike.

"We now know that there was no connection between Mr. Ahmadi and ISIS-Khorasan, that his activities on that day were completely harmless and not at all related to the imminent threat we believed we faced, and that Mr. Ahmadi was just as innocent a victim as were the others tragically killed," said Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III in a statement.



The car that was targeted in the drone strike remained in the courtyard of the family home weeks later. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

For one of Mr. Zemari's colleagues, the country director for NEI, the ISIS taint still lingers.

At a news briefing on Friday about the incident, Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of U.S. Central Command, said that Mr. Ahmadi's car first came under surveillance after it was seen picking up a bag at a suspected ISIS safe house, labeled "Compound No 1."

"In the 40 hours prior to the strike, sensitive intelligence indicated Compound No. 1 on the map was being used by ISIS-K planners, used to facilitate future attacks," General McKenzie said. "We have very good intelligence to support that belief that this was an ISIS-K-related center."

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However, witness testimony and visual evidence gathered by The Times indicates that this compound was likely the home of NEI's country director, Mr. Ahmadi's boss. The director had asked Mr. Ahmadi to stop by his home to pick up his laptop on the way to work that morning.

On Saturday, the director, who has previously asserted to The Times that he was not connected to ISIS, gave a tour of his home while his young children and elderly parents were present, the second such visit by a Times reporter since the attack. Inside the house, children's English lessons were visible on a white board.

"My father built this house. I grew up here," the country director said. "I really feel threatened, afraid, insulted, and humiliated by having the label of ISIS."

For security reasons, The Times is not publishing his name or the address of the country director who is seeking to be resettled in the United States.

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.

When asked whether there could have been an ISIS safe house nearby, the director said that he had known most of his neighbors for years, but that there had been a new tenant in the house next door, which shares a wall. He said he found that person's behavior suspicious and had reported him to the Afghan intelligence service. The tenant moved out before the Taliban took over the capital.

General McKenzie's briefing noted that rockets were fired from nearby the compound on Aug. 30, the morning after the fatal drone strike. Less than two hundred yards from the NEI director's house was the wreckage of a white Toyota Corolla used in the rocket attack, one of the most common cars found on the streets of Kabul. It was still present on Saturday.



Childrens' English lessons on a whiteboard in the home of the NEI country director in Kabul on Saturday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

As news of the American admission spread, Afghans took to social media to express anger and frustration, but little surprise, at the Pentagon's mistake. Many demanded that the United States pay compensation for the family.

General McKenzie said the military was discussing the possibility of payments.

While the drone strike has received considerable attention, in part because it came in the last 48 hours the United States was in Afghanistan, it was a familiar sequence for Afghans and those who track civilian casualties.

For much of the past 20 years, as the United States and its allies waged war in Afghanistan, Western forces have killed the wrong people in their effort to target terrorists.

In the years in between the 2001 invasion and Mr. Ahmadi's death, the United States admitted to mistakenly killing hundreds of civilians. The military killed dozens of civilians at a wedding in 2002 and more than 100 civilians, many of them children, in Farah Province in 2009. In 2016, the military mistakenly bombed a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz Province, killing 42 doctors, patients and medical staff.

For Mr. Ahmadi's relatives, the mistaken killing shook their faith in America, even as they still desperately wish to be resettled there as refugees.

They questioned the U.S. military's latest narrative of events, including that the targeting team, which believed that water containers being carried by Mr. Ahmadi contained explosives, did not see any of the seven children before they carried out the strike.

“They could see the containers being put in the car, but they couldn’t see the children?” said Mr. Ahmadi’s uncle, Mohammed.

His brother, Emal, said that he’d previously believed official accounts about U.S. airstrikes in distant parts of Afghanistan.

“Back then, we’d think, yeah, that’s good that they hit, say, ISIS,” he said. “After this happened to us, I realized that maybe many of those people were innocent, like we were.”

Matthieu Aikins reported from Kabul and Alissa J. Rubin from Paris. Christoph Koettl contributed reporting from New York, Eric Schmitt from Washington, Sami Sahak from Los Angeles and Wali Arian from Istanbul.

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