

Targeted Killings Are Terrorizing Afghans. And No One Is Claiming Them.

Most officials believe the Taliban are behind the attacks on civil leaders, but others fear that factions are using chaos as a cover to settle scores, in an echo of Afghanistan's past civil war.

By Fahim Abed and Thomas Gibbons-Neff

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KABUL, Afghanistan — A military prosecutor who thought upholding the law was the highest honor, a doctor who inspired her family to study medicine, a journalist who wanted to hold those in power to account and a human-rights activist who sought to combat poverty in her home province: all murdered within weeks by unknown attackers as winter settled over Afghanistan.

Their deaths offer a glimpse into the targeted killings of community leaders and off-duty security forces that have wracked Afghanistan for months — the frequent echo of explosions and gunshots serving as reminders for those in cities and towns across the country and especially in Kabul, the capital, that a generation of Afghans is being methodically cut down.

The Afghan Interior Ministry would not provide the exact number of assassinations recorded in Afghanistan last year, but The New York Times has documented the deaths of at least 136 civilians and 168 security force members in such killings, worse than nearly any other year of the war.

The attacks — directed at civil servants, members of the media, human rights workers and former and current security force members — represent a shift from targeted assaults on high-profile officials by the Taliban and other groups operating in the country toward civil society's rank-and-file and security forces who are at home with their families, with responsibility for the deaths often unclaimed.



Mourners carrying the coffin of Malalai Maiwand, a television journalist who was shot and killed by unknown gunmen in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, in December. Parwiz/Reuters

The killings are a worrying sign of how much remains unsettled as the United States military prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan after nearly two decades of fighting, and have added to fears that more violence and chaos will follow.

The timing makes most officials believe that the Taliban are using the assassinations as a complement to their coordinated assaults on security posts and government-controlled territory to strike fear and increase the government's desperation at the negotiating table.

But some officials believe that at least some of the killings have a different source: political factions outside the Taliban that are beginning to use chaos as a cover as the country starts breaking down under pressure, settling scores in a troubling pattern reminiscent of Afghanistan's disastrous civil war a generation ago.

This new chapter of intimidation and violence first opened following the Feb. 29 peace agreement between the Taliban and the United States, and it continued through the negotiations between Afghan and Taliban representatives in Qatar that paused last month. The next phase of discussions, set to reconvene on Tuesday, will focus on solidifying the agenda for the negotiations with the ultimate goal of creating a political road map for a future government.

The purpose of these current killings appears to be to terrorize Afghan society into submitting to whatever terms emerge from the talks, whether that is a peace agreement or civil war.

In the first half of the year, the targeted killings were mostly limited to religious scholars and civilians in outlying districts and provinces, according to The Times's data. The pattern of bloodshed next emerged in cities, leaving a trail of slain judges, prosecutors, civil society activists and journalists.

Sometimes victims received threats to pressure them to stop working; other times, there was no warning before they were killed, according to family members. The Interior Ministry has advised news organizations to either arm or better protect their staffs or close their doors. Several Afghan journalists have fled the country, and local journalism associations have called on reporters to boycott government news for three days to protest the attacks, spurred by the assassination of a radio station manager in Ghor Province on New Year's Day.



Firefighters responded to an explosion that killed two people in Kabul on Dec. 26. The attack was carried out using a magnetic bomb, consistent with other recent attacks. Hedayatullah Amid/EPA, via Shutterstock

"When he told me about the threats a month before he got killed, I was worried, but he calmed me, saying, 'I haven't hurt anyone, why would anyone hurt me?'" said Nargis Noorzai Faizan, the widow of Pamir Faizan, a military prosecutor shot by gunmen in Kabul on Dec. 6. "I was a 4-year-old when my father got killed by mujahedeen insurgents. He was an officer in the army and thought that he didn't make trouble for anyone, so he won't be targeted. He was assassinated."

"Now I am 30, and I lost my husband to another insurgency," she added.

These targeted killings have been primarily carried out in two ways: gunfire and homemade bombs, typically assembled using plastic high explosives and powerful magnets, a government intelligence official recently told The Times, speaking on condition of anonymity. The magnet allows the attacker to easily and quickly attach the bomb to a car.

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Abdul Qayoom, the brother of Dr. Nazifa Ibrahim, the acting head of the health department of the prisons administration who, with four others, was killed by a bomb targeting their vehicle in Kabul on Dec. 22, had warned his sister just weeks earlier that security in their neighborhood was worsening.

"She told me, 'Brother, I am the head doctor, and I am not dealing directly with patients, so no one will try to hurt me,'" Mr. Qayoom said. "She dedicated herself to her job. She promised to serve her people and she fulfilled that promise."

While no group has taken credit for the bombing that killed Dr. Ibrahimi, U.S. and Afghan security officials say the Taliban have established a network of third-party criminals to carry out assassinations around the country.

Ahmad Zia Saraj, the head of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, recently told Parliament that his agency had arrested 270 Taliban members who were part of a special unit called Obaida Karwan that has been linked to the killings.



The aftermath of the targeted bombing that killed Dr. Nazifa Ibrahimi and four other doctors in Kabul. Rahmat Gul/Associated Press

For the Taliban, the aim of these attacks is likely twofold: to degrade public trust in the government and to eliminate those who might oppose the group's interpretation of justice and virtue, especially if a version of their hard-line Islamic government — known for human rights violations during its rule in the 1990s — returns to power following any peace deal.

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.

Still, the group continues to deny accusations of its involvement.

"Civil employees of government, civil institutions, civil organizations and civil society activists and independent people were never in our target list. Our mujahedeen are not involved in their killing," said Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Taliban. "We have condemned these killings and we reject any involvement in these killings."

Despite the Taliban's presumed role in many of the unclaimed attacks, some Afghans are pointing fingers at government-linked factions that could also benefit from the targeted killings, along with the Islamic State affiliate operating in the country.

"Drug smugglers, land grabbers, corrupt officials and those against government reform plans are also behind these attacks," said Dawlat Waziri, a former Afghan general and military analyst. "They want the peace talks to collapse and even support a civil war, because the more chaos and war in this country, the more they will benefit."

For now the killings continue, with the Afghan government seemingly incapable of stopping or slowing them, despite repeated promises to hold those responsible to account.

Rahmatullah Nikzad, a freelance journalist who worked for The Associated Press and Al Jazeera, was gunned down in Ghazni Province on Dec. 21, as was Freshta Kohistani, a human-rights activist who was shot, alongside her brother, on Dec. 24 near her home in Kapisa Province. Ms. Kohistani had recently posted on Facebook that security officials were ignoring death threats that she had received.



The funeral for Rahmatullah Nikzad, a photojournalist who was killed outside his home on Dec. 21. Sayed Mustafa/EPA, via Shutterstock

"She was raising the problems of people," said Rooyin Habibi, another of Ms. Kohistani's brothers. "She was fighting for the rights of her people and she wanted a better future for Afghanistan."

This type of violence is reminiscent of the killings and disappearances of Afghans working in Peshawar, Pakistan, in the late 1980s and early 1990s as Afghanistan cascaded into a civil war across the border. Women, intellectuals and political and religious figures, many of whom who were opposed to the policies of the Islamist insurgent groups that rose to power following the defeat of the Soviets in 1989, were detained or killed. And the abductions and killings of the thousands who spoke out against Afghanistan's communist regime in the years before were well documented.

Today, what Shaharzad Akbar, the chairwoman of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, fears — aside from being killed — is that these deaths will become white noise for the international community, more so than they already have. Afghan lives, she said, do not seem to be valued by much of the world.

“We die, there is a tweet, and people move on,” Ms. Akbar said. “The only tangible thing that has happened to Afghans under the peace process is that they used to know who their killers are, and now they don’t.”

Fahim Abed reported from Kabul, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff from Geneva. Fatima Faizi and Najim Rahim contributed reporting from Kabul.