

How a Longstanding Rivalry Spiraled Into 5 Deaths Between 2 Families

In Afghanistan, a rise in targeted attacks that the government seems unable to stop has also encouraged the settling of old scores through vendetta killings.

By David Zucchino and Asadullah Timory

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Bismillah Adel Aymaq, a prominent radio journalist in western Afghanistan, was preparing a groundbreaking report late last year that accused a provincial council member of corruption.

In November, even before his investigation aired, Mr. Aymaq, 22, posted on Facebook that his home and car had been damaged. By New Year's Day, he was dead — gunned down by four armed men in a car near the radio station he managed in Ghor Province.

His murder became the genesis of an unfolding tragedy, one that would lead to the deaths of the council member in question and three of Mr. Aymaq's relatives and the kidnapping of three other relatives before it was over.

In a country where thousands of civilians are killed and maimed every year and the justice system is notoriously corrupt and ineffective, the cover of war and civil strife are used by extremist groups to carry out vendettas.

Such attacks, exacerbated by tribal or political disputes, have become even more common during a campaign of targeted assassinations that has swept through Afghan cities over the past year — and anti-government insurgents are not the only ones taking advantage. Afghan and U.S. officials say people aligned with the government or political parties, as well as powerful families aiming to settle old scores, are responsible for some targeted killings.

The killings highlight a disturbing pattern of violence as the United States military prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan, and have added to fears that more death and chaos will follow — in similar fashion to the civil war that fractured the country a generation ago.

In the weeks before his death, Mr. Aymaq had told colleagues he had gathered evidence of weapons and drug smuggling by Ezatullah Bik, a provincial council member. That evidence was incorporated into a broader report on corruption within the Ghor provincial council, broadcast in mid-December by a radio station in Kabul, local officials and journalists said.



The journalist Bismillah Adel Aymaq.
Radio Sada-e-Ghor

The report reignited a longstanding vendetta over land between the families of Mr. Aymaq and Mr. Bik, local officials said.

The council member reacted angrily and told colleagues he blamed Mr. Aymaq for the entire investigation, according to officials and journalists.

Two weeks after the reporter was killed, Mr. Bik was dead, too.

He died of wounds suffered during a shootout on Jan. 14 with National Directorate of Security agents who went to arrest him at his home in connection with Mr. Aymaq's death, the police said. Three of Mr. Bik's bodyguards were wounded in the clash, said Fazlulhaq Ehsan, head of Ghor's provincial council.

The National Directorate of Security office in Ghor declined to comment.

Then came the targeted killings on Feb. 25 of the slain reporter's relatives in what the police said was a revenge attack.

Provincial officials blamed the Taliban. Ehsanullah Bik, Mr. Bik's brother, is a commander for the insurgent group, said Amirdad Parsa, the police spokesman for Ghor Province.

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This type of vendetta killing is a pattern, said Abdul Basir Qadiri, a member of the Ghor provincial council. "When people see a rival tribe become powerful, they join the Taliban or kill the leader of the rival tribe so they can remain the only powerful family in that area," he said.

Mr. Aymaq's brother, Sebghatullah, 28 — a police officer — and his cousin, Gol-Ahmad, 35, were shot and killed during the attack on Sebghatullah's home in the village of Tigha-e-Timor, the police said. Also killed was Mr. Aymaq's 13-year-old niece Arefa.

Five other relatives, including a 3-year-old niece, were shot and wounded. The gunmen abducted three male relatives, including Mr. Aymaq's 11-year-old nephew, police said. They have not been heard from since.

Last year, 707 civilians were killed and 541 were wounded in targeted killings — a 45 percent increase over 2019, according to a United Nations report published Feb. 23. Almost all those attacks remain unsolved or have not been investigated. The U.N. report said of victims' family members: "Many knew little if anything about whether an investigation was being undertaken."



Mr. Aymaq in the field. Radio Sada-e-Ghor

In many targeted killings, officials say, attacks that appear related to the victims' work or position are also enmeshed in local grievances and disputes, complicating family efforts to find out what really happened to their loved ones.

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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.

“These killings appear to be premeditated and targeted,” said a separate U.N. report, published in February, that focused on an upsurge in killings of journalists and human rights workers. In nine of 10 such deaths, the report noted, “impunity for such violations and abuses is total.”

From January 2018 through January of this year, 33 journalists and 32 human rights workers were killed in such attacks, the report said.

On March 2, three women who worked for a broadcast station in the eastern city of Jalalabad were killed by gunmen in two separate attacks, for which the Islamic State in Afghanistan claimed responsibility. The terror group also claimed responsibility for killing a woman in December who worked as a television presenter at the same station.

No group has claimed responsibility for other journalists and human rights workers killed since September, including Mr. Aymaq. The Afghan government has blamed the Taliban for many such killings, but the militants have denied involvement.



Journalists at the site of a bombing attack in Kabul last month. The country has seen an upsurge in killings of journalists and human rights workers, according to a U.N. report. Rahmat Gu/Associated Press

The absence of claims of responsibility is “exacerbating further a climate of fear,” the U.N. report said.

Lala Gul, Mr. Aymaq’s brother and a police investigator in Ghor Province, said his relatives were killed and kidnapped to prevent any retaliation.

“Sebghatullah was a courageous police officer,” Mr. Gul said of his brother. “They thought Sebghatullah would take revenge on them, so they killed him.”

As a police officer, Mr. Gul said, he realized the difficulty of bringing anyone to justice in cases involving powerful local officials and the Taliban, especially in a remote province like Ghor.

Mr. Parsa, the police spokesman, said no arrests had been made in the killings or kidnappings of Mr. Aymaq’s relatives.

“No, we could not arrest anyone accused of killing the Aymaq family,” Mr. Parsa said. “But we are trying to find them.”

David Zucchino reported from Kabul and Asad Timory from Herat, Afghanistan. Fahim Abed contributed reporting from Kabul.