

Afghan Contractor Handed Out Russian Cash to Kill Americans, Officials Say

A small-time businessman became a key middleman for bounties on coalition troops in Afghanistan, U.S. intelligence reports say. Friends saw him grow rich, but didn't know how.

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Published July 1, 2020 Updated July 13, 2020

KABUL, Afghanistan — He was a lowly drug smuggler, neighbors and relatives say, then ventured into contracting, seeking a slice of the billions of dollars the U.S.-led coalition was funneling into construction projects in Afghanistan.

But he really began to show off his wealth in recent years, after establishing a base in Russia, though how he earned those riches remained mysterious. On his regular trips home to northern Afghanistan, he drove the latest model cars, protected by bodyguards, and his house was recently upgraded to a four-story villa.

Now Rahmatullah Azizi stands as a central piece of a puzzle rocking Washington, named in American intelligence reports and confirmed by Afghan officials as a key middleman who for years handed out money from a Russian military intelligence unit to reward Taliban-linked fighters for targeting American troops in Afghanistan, according to American and Afghan officials.

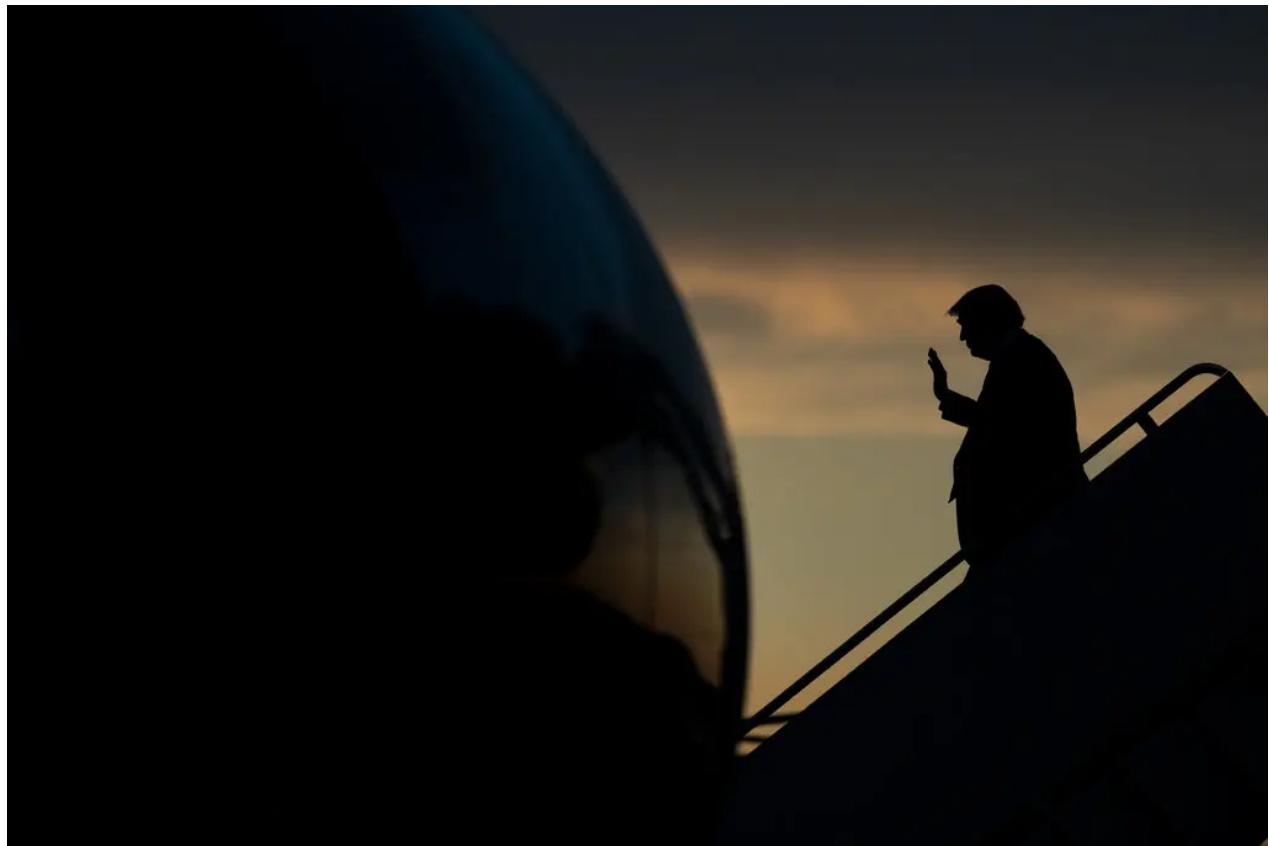
As security agencies connected the dots of the bounty scheme and narrowed in on him, they carried out sweeping raids to arrest dozens of his relatives and associates about six months ago, but discovered that Mr. Azizi had sneaked out of Afghanistan and was likely back in Russia. What they did find in one of his homes, in Kabul, was about half a million dollars in cash.

American and Afghan officials have maintained for years that Russia was running clandestine operations to undermine the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and aid the Taliban.

But U.S. officials only recently concluded that a Russian spy agency was paying bounties for killing coalition troops, including Americans, which the Kremlin and the Taliban have denied.

According to officials briefed on the matter, U.S. intelligence officials believe the program is run by Unit 29155, an arm of the Russian military intelligence agency known as the G.R.U. that has carried out assassinations and other operations overseas.

That a conduit for the payments would be someone like Mr. Azizi — tied to the American reconstruction effort, enmeshed in the regional netherworld, but not prominent enough to attract outside attention — speaks to the depth of Russia's reach into the increasingly complicated Afghan battlefield, exploiting a nexus of crime and terror to strike blows with years of deniability.



White House officials initially said that President Trump was never briefed on the bounty scheme. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

The public revelation last week of that conclusion has touched off a political firestorm in Washington. White House officials said at first that President Trump was never briefed on the matter, but it emerged that the intelligence assessment was included in a written briefing to the president in late February, if not earlier.

As Democratic and Republican officials have expressed alarm at the news, and the administration's lack of action in response, the White House has insisted that the information was uncertain.

Details of Mr. Azizi's role in the bounty scheme were confirmed through a dozen interviews that included U.S. and Afghan officials aware of the intelligence and the raids that led to it; his neighbors and friends; and business associates of the middle men arrested on suspicion of involvement. All spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid retaliation.

U.S. intelligence reports named Mr. Azizi as a key middleman between the G.R.U. and militants linked to the Taliban who carried out the attacks. He was among those who collected the cash in Russia, which intelligence files described as multiple payments of "hundreds of thousands of dollars." Those files were among the materials provided to Congress this week.

Through a layered and complex Hawala system — an informal way to transfer money — he delivered it to Afghanistan for the missions, the files say. The transfers were often sliced into smaller amounts that routed through several regional countries before arriving in Afghanistan, associates of the arrested businessmen said.

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Afghan officials said prizes of as much as \$100,000 per killed soldier were offered for American and coalition targets.



American Special Forces operating in Kabul in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Just how the money was dispersed to militants carrying out attacks for the Taliban, and at what level the coordination occurred, remains unclear. But officials say the network had grown increasingly ambitious and was in communication with more senior levels in Taliban military ranks to discuss potential targets.

About six months ago, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, raided the offices of several Hawala businessmen both in Kabul, the capital, and in Kunduz, in the north, who were believed to be associated with the bounty scheme, making more than a dozen arrests.

"The target of the operation was Rahmat, who was going back and forth to Russia for a long time and said he worked there but no one knew what he did," said Safiullah Amiry, the deputy head of Kunduz provincial council, referring to Mr. Azizi. But by the time the raid took place, "Rahmat had fled."

"From what I heard from security officials, the money had come from Russia through Rahmat," he added.

Russia was initially seen as cooperating with American efforts after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, as its interests in defeating Al Qaeda, an international Islamist terror group, aligned with those of 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.

But in recent years, as the two powers clashed elsewhere, the Kremlin grew wary of the prolonged United States presence and moved closer to the Taliban, hedging its bets on who would take power in a post-American Afghanistan.

The Russians also saw an opportunity for long-awaited payback for the Soviet humiliation in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when the Red Army withdrew after being unable to defeat a United States-backed insurgency.

Russia has walked a fine balance in recent years, eager to bloody the American nose, but wary of Afghanistan collapsing into a chaos that could spill over its borders. Publicly, Russia has admitted only to information-sharing with the Taliban in fighting the Islamic State in Afghanistan, a common foe.

The U.S. conclusion in 2019 that the Russians were sending bounty money to the Taliban came at a delicate time in the conflict, just as the United States was deep into negotiations with the insurgents over a deal to withdraw the remaining American troops from the country.

Some of the attacks believed to be part of the bounty scheme were carried out around the time the Trump administration was actively reaching out to Russia for cooperation on those peace talks. Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy leading the talks, repeatedly met with Russian officials to build consensus around the American endgame.



Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, left, signed a peace agreement with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a founder of the Taliban, in February. Karim Jaafar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The Afghan battlefield is saturated with smaller terrorist groups in addition to the Taliban, who are still responsible for the majority of the violence. Criminal networks, profiteers and terror training experts also freelance their services — often to several groups at the same time.

Mr. Azizi, who neighbors and relatives said is in his 40s, thrived in that convoluted, murky environment.

A friend who has known him since his early days in Kunduz, as well as later in Russia, said he had started off with smuggling small shipments of drugs into Iran in his 20s, but that venture was not very successful. He had returned to northern Afghanistan, and somehow won contracts from the American-led coalition forces to build stretches of a couple roads in Kunduz, before making his way to Russia.

None of those interviewed who know Mr. Azizi were surprised when his associates were raided about six months ago and one of his brothers taken into custody with the half a million dollars in cash. As one of his friends put it, he had gone from “not even having a

blanket” to having multiple houses, fancy cars, and security escorts.

Michael Schwirtz contributed reporting.