

## Pentagon Defends Deadly Drone Strike in Kabul

A New York Times investigation, with video analysis and interviews at the site, has cast doubt on the U.S. military's account.



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Published Sept. 13, 2021 Updated Sept. 17, 2021

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon continued to assert on Monday that the last U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan was necessary to prevent an attack on American troops, despite a New York Times investigation that raises doubts about the military's version of events, including whether explosives were in the vehicle that was blown up and whether the driver had a connection to the Islamic State.

The Pentagon press secretary, John F. Kirby, said that Central Command, which carried out the strike on Aug. 29 in the waning days of America's 20-year war in Afghanistan, was investigating the results. But that inquiry, Mr. Kirby suggested to reporters, may be limited to what Central Command can glean from intercepts, video imagery and interviews with sources.

"I'm not going to get ahead of what Centcom is doing with their assessment of that strike," Mr. Kirby said at a news conference. "I am not aware of any option that would put investigators on the ground in Kabul to complete their assessment."

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have said that the missile was launched because the military had intelligence suggesting a credible, imminent threat to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, where U.S. and allied troops were frantically trying to evacuate people. General Milley later called the strike "righteous."

Military officials said they did not know the identity of the car's driver when the drone fired, but they had deemed him suspicious because of his activities that day: He had possibly visited an Islamic State safe house, they said, and at one point he loaded into the vehicle what they thought could be explosives.

Times reporting has identified the driver as Zemari Ahmadi, a longtime worker for a U.S. aid group. Evidence suggests that his travels that day involved transporting colleagues to and from work. And an analysis of video feeds showed that what the military might have seen was Mr. Ahmadi and a colleague loading canisters of water into his trunk to bring home to his family.

While the U.S. military said the drone strike might have killed three civilians, Times reporting showed that it killed 10, including seven children, in a dense residential block.

Mr. Ahmadi, 43, worked as an electrical engineer for Nutrition and Education International, a California-based aid group. The morning of the strike, his boss called from the office around 8:45 a.m. and asked him to pick up his laptop.

"I asked him if he was still at home, and he said yes," the country director said in an interview at the aid group's office in Kabul. Like the rest of Mr. Ahmadi's colleagues, he spoke on the condition of anonymity because of his association with an American company in Afghanistan.

According to his relatives, Mr. Ahmadi left for work around 9 a.m. in a white 1996 Toyota Corolla that belonged to N.E.I., departing from his house, where he lived with his three brothers and their families, a few kilometers west of the Kabul airport.

U.S. officials told The Times that it was around this time that their target, a white sedan, first came under surveillance, after it was seen leaving a compound identified as a suspected ISIS safe house, about 5 kilometers northwest of the airport.