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Ferrying the Dead of Both Sides in a Cruel Afghan War

By [AZAM AHMED](#)

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Malik Abdul Hakim, who has lost two sons in the conflict, delivers the bodies of Afghan soldiers and insurgents to their relatives.

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — On the brindled plains of southern Afghanistan, Malik Abdul Hakim is death's ferryman.

He collects the bodies of soldiers and police officers killed in areas of Taliban dominance and takes them home. From government centers, he carries slain insurgents back to their families, negotiating roads laced with roadside bombs.

Mr. Hakim, a slender 66-year-old with a white beard that hangs to his chest, laughs when asked what drives him. He never envisioned he would have this life, crossing front lines for strangers. But he finds meaning in his work, delivering a measure of dignity to families scarred by war.

Still, he prays that one day he will be out of a job.

“Every time I see a body, I pray there will not be another,” he says in a soft and oddly youthful voice. “I will be thankful when there is peace and stability, and I no longer have work.”

Until then, he says, he will not be deterred. Not by the wretched smell of corpses, the physical demands of lifting the bodies or the psychological toll inflicted by a front-row seat to the atrocities of war. Not even by the death of his two sons at insurgents’ hands.



Mr. Hakim with Afghan Red Crescent workers in Kandahar, said he had picked up 313 bodies in the last year alone. His work began seven years ago in his native Zhare.

“All these years, I have done this for God,” he says. “I call both sides my brothers because they are Afghans and Muslims. I don’t want favors or position. My only aim is to help those in need.”

That a man can shoulder such a burden is a sad feature of the prolonged war in Afghanistan, which grows more deadly by the week. The Afghan security forces lost more men last year than in any previous year, as did the Taliban. Since he started seven years ago, Mr. Hakim has carried 713 bodies, including 313 in the past year alone.

His efforts have tracked the violence from the bombed-out remnants of airstrikes to the vehicles shattered by roadside bombs to the churned landscape of intensified fighting between the Afghan government and the Taliban now that the American troop presence has dwindled to a token force.

“He has stayed neutral — he is not against us and he is not against the Taliban,” said Mohammad Masoom Khan Qadiri, the district police chief in Zhare, in Kandahar Province. “He is very much loved by the people whom he has helped throughout these years.”

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Esmatullah, whose two brothers were returned by Mr. Hakim last year after the Taliban executed them, said his family revered the man. “My elderly mother doesn’t pray for her sons first,” said Esmatullah, who goes by one name. “First she prays for him. That’s how much she admires his work.”

Mr. Hakim’s work began by chance after the death of a famed Taliban commander in Zhare, his native district. The insurgents wanted the body of their leader returned, and neighbors suggested they ask Mr. Hakim, who was volunteering for the Afghan Red Crescent at the time.

Mr. Hakim decided to give it a try. He drove to the district center and made his entreaty. As he waited, the district police commander had a question of his own for Mr. Hakim: Why had he never offered to collect the government bodies?

“I told them it never occurred to me to do any of this,” he said with a wry smile. “I wasn’t even sure I wanted to do this for the Taliban.”

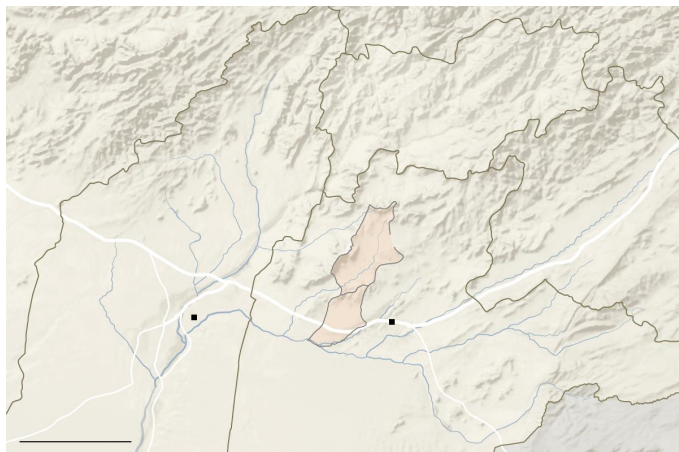
Eventually, the government agreed to release the body, but on the condition that the Taliban would do the same.

“I wasn’t expecting this war to go on so long or to carry so many bodies,” Mr. Hakim said, plucking at a set of green prayer beads. “I thought it would only be these first few.

“Who would think about this crazy job for themselves?” he asked.

As the war intensified, so did his work and the danger that accompanied it. He demanded that both sides give him paperwork identifying him as a neutral party, so that neither would unwittingly attack him. He carries the documents at all times.

A few years ago, he began receiving assistance from the International Committee of the Red Cross. His area also expanded to include parts of Helmand, Zabul and Oruzgan provinces. One day last summer, he carted 28 Taliban bodies after an exceptionally brutal fight in Zhare.



Days like that worry him. Time has done nothing to bleed either side of its will. With foreign troops fully off the battlefield, the death toll is rising.

“They have been at war for 13 years, and if they fight another 13 years they will not see peace,” he says. “They must sit down and speak with one another.”

Such advice has not come cheaply for Mr. Hakim. He has lost two sons and a son-in-law to the war.

Five years ago, his son-in-law, Ismatullah, drove a water truck on a road construction crew. One morning, he brought two of Mr. Hakim’s sons with him to Khakrez, a district directly north of the city of Kandahar.

The men never returned.

Mr. Hakim knew the area. Months earlier, he had delivered two Taliban bodies to a commander there. But the commander now refused to divulge anything, offering only that the fate of his family was in the hands of the Taliban court. Mr. Hakim waited four days, then left.

Distraught, Mr. Hakim drove to Quetta, Pakistan, to meet with a senior Taliban member to plead for information. He returned home with an official letter instructing another local commander to take him to his sons.

A few days later, he met the commander along a nondescript stretch of the highway in Khakrez. The man was leery. He asked Mr. Hakim’s driver whether the courier’s sons, Azizullah and Ruhullah, had been working for the government.

After an hour’s drive, the convoy pulled onto a desolate plain, where the Taliban conveyed one final insult before vanishing down the road.

“They told us to smell in the area and we would find the bodies,” Mr. Hakim recalled, weeping slightly.

After searching for an hour in the blistering heat, Mr. Hakim found his dead children buried in a shallow grave. He dug for two hours with his hands.

He drove straight to his family’s cemetery in Zhare. He did not stop at his home in Kandahar city so his wife could say goodbye. Her boys were no longer recognizable.

“She tells me I buried them alive,” he says, his voice rusted with sadness. “To this day, my wife cries to me that I never showed her our sons’ faces.”

He might have refused to aid the Taliban any longer and taken another job or continued to farm on his land. But he buried his bitterness with his sons.

“If it took me this long to find my sons, imagine how long it must take ordinary people,” he said, stifling tears. “I told myself I had to continue what I’m doing, for the sake of the powerless.”