Afghan Witness

Centre for Information Resilience

Systematic and Summary: Investigating Evidence of Prisoner Executions in the Panjshir Valley in September 2022

Report by Afghan Witness, October 2022

afghanwitness.org

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[WARNING: GRAPHIC] This report contains highly graphic imagery

Executive Summary

On 13 September 2022, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid claimed 40 resistance fighters had been killed and 101 captured as part of a "large-scale clearance operation" conducted in the Rukha, Dara and Afshar districts of Panjshir province. No further details were given on the nature or circumstances of the 40 deaths.

The National Resistance Front (NRF) - Afghanistan's most prominent resistance group - claimed that the Taliban was exaggerating the number of fighters killed. Ali Nazary, head of NRF's foreign relations, told the AFP news agency that "a small group" of NRF forces had been captured and killed by the Taliban.

Around this time, footage began to surface online showing Taliban fighters allegedly executing resistance fighters, alongside further footage and images indicating extrajudicial executions. On 14 September 2022, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) stated that it was "gravely concerned" by the latest allegations of "serious human rights violations" in Panjshir.

Using open source (OSINT) techniques, Afghan Witness (AW) has been able to conclusively link one group of Taliban fighters to the execution of ten men in the Dara District area. AW was able to geolocate footage showing the execution of five men by the Taliban group to a mountaintop in Pochaveh Valley, in the Dara-e-Hazara area of Dara District. The same five men can be seen in earlier footage being marched up a mountain – hands tied behind their backs - by the Taliban fighters. The video can be located within metres of the execution site.

The group of Taliban fighters can be identified with five more men who were later executed. One victim is seen being marched up the mountain alongside the first five, and two are recorded being interrogated by the fighters. The bodies of these three men were photographed together at an unidentifiable location, but likely within the vicinity of the first execution site.

The last two confirmed victims, allegedly father and son, are photographed in captivity alongside a building and in the rear of a truck and recorded being interrogated by a fighter from the Taliban group, who was also present at the mountaintop executions. The bodies of the two men are later shown in a video at an unidentifiable location.

Furthermore, AW has gathered credible evidence of a further 17 executions [bringing the total to 27] and 30 deaths as a result of the Taliban offensive against alleged resistance fighters in Panjshir [bringing the total to 57 victims]. The close-up images are original and only surfaced during the offensive, though cannot be geolocated.

1. The execution of five men

Between 12-14 September 2022, multiple videos and photographs surfaced on social media purporting to show the execution of resistance fighters by a group of Taliban.

The content was shared by pro- and anti-Taliban accounts alike, with pro-Taliban users celebrating the brutal death of their opponents, while anti-Taliban and human rights campaigners highlighted the content as clear evidence of Taliban abuses.

Two videos **[WARNING: GRAPHIC]** (Video A, Video B), recorded by Taliban fighters within the group, showed the moment of execution from different viewpoints.

Video A (00:47 length), filmed over the shoulder of one of the executioners as they open fire, provides a close-up perspective and the clearest view of the incident.

Five men - one facing the executioners on his knees, the others sitting facing away, all blindfolded with hands bound behind their backs - are repeatedly shot for 20 seconds from a range of approximately five metres by an assembled line of Taliban fighters, accompanied by celebratory cries from the large group of fighters.

Figure: Zoomed screenshot from the start of Video A, showing the five men blindfolded, hands bound behind the back, metres away from the Taliban firing line

The video is edited at the 00:23 mark, as a man carrying a radio [Suspect 1] walks across the frame. Following the edit, a few seconds later, one of the executioners [Suspect 6] advances toward the bodies, briefly opening fire again with an automatic weapon.

Video B (01:27 length), filmed from approximately 20 metres to the left of Video A, starts recording 20 seconds before Video A. The line of victims can be made out, and a man [Suspect 1] can be seen slightly in front of the line of assembled fighters making gestures. Another man [Suspect 3] can be made out carrying the white flag of the Taliban. He is also seen in Video A, which shows him firing on the captives.

Figure: Screenshot (00:16) from Video B showing the captives (red) lined up in front of the Taliban group, seconds before they open fire. Suspect 1 (green) is seen stepping back into the line, while Suspect 3 (blue) is holding a Taliban flag

Video B shows the men firing for approximately 20 seconds, followed by a pause of 19 seconds, before a second short burst of fire. The gunshots heard at this point match the second sequence of fire in Video A, following the edit. As Video B is filmed continuously, it is possible to identify the period edited out of Video A as an eight-second slot corresponding with 00:42-00:50 in Video B.

It is unclear why this edit was made and who made it. AW has not yet found a longer, unedited version of the video. It is possible the video was edited for length or effect by users before posting, or that Suspect 1 blocks the filmer's view, leading it to be cut.

Video B also provides a clearer sense of the size of the Taliban group, with the filmer panning across the crowd, showing a relatively large force of several dozen fighters.

Walking among the bodies

Videos and photos found on social media showed the Taliban group immediately after the execution. Fighters can be seen walking around and among the dead bodies, recording and commenting.

A 31-second video **[WARNING: GRAPHIC]** (Video C) provides very graphic close-ups of the victims, with one Taliban fighter heard saying: *"This is Panjshir's resistance, Dara-e-Hazara. These Panjshiris are in Dara-e-Hazara. Look at them. If you are resisting, this will be your situation. Your brains will be on the rock like this. Look at his brain, this will be your situation."* Further speaking to the deceased while putting a foot on the deceased man's head: *"How are you?* [In Persian] *This is the resistance, look at them."*

In a 44-second video **[WARNING: GRAPHIC]** (Video D), a Taliban fighter can be heard stating: *"There were two brothers. Their father is over there…from Khenj district".* This comment is consistent with information gathered by the Afghan NGO Afghan Peace Watch, which reported that among the executed men was 'Yar Mohammad' - commander of Shaba camp, a resistance camp in the Dara-e-Hazara area - and his two sons.

Several other videos and photos of the fighters with the bodies aided geolocation and chronolocation, as well as providing close-ups of the Taliban fighters at the scene, which were cross-referenced with other videos suspected to feature the group.

Locating the videos

With multiple videos providing different perspectives on the landscape, and clues to the location in the dialogue, AW was able to confidently geolocate the execution site to a mountaintop in the Pochaveh Valley in the Dara-e-Hazara area of Dara district, Panjshir.

The site is approximately 2.5km from a resistance position previously identified by AW, which had been used to fire RPGs and mortars into the valley in early-mid August (see Appendix B: Recent resistance and Taliban activity in the area of executions).

In the execution videos (Videos A and B), the precise area of the execution is in shadow, but more elevated areas and the ridge running down the mountain are in the sun. The fighters are also in sunlight even though the ground is in shade. Video B shows the shadow is cast by the mountain ridge, indicating the sun is very low in the sky - early morning. At the location in September, the sun rises just after 0530.

In videos of the aftermath, the fighters at the execution site are now in the sun - it has risen higher - and their shadows are long and to the northwest. From the angles of the shadows, AW would estimate these videos are recorded at around 0700-0800, putting the execution slightly earlier.

Figure: Dark ground markings seen in the background of Video A (highlighted left) are visible on Google Earth (highlighted right) at location [35.338321, 69.697990]

Figure: Features visible in Video A (highlighted left) matched on Google Earth (highlighted right) at the location [35.338321, 69.697990].

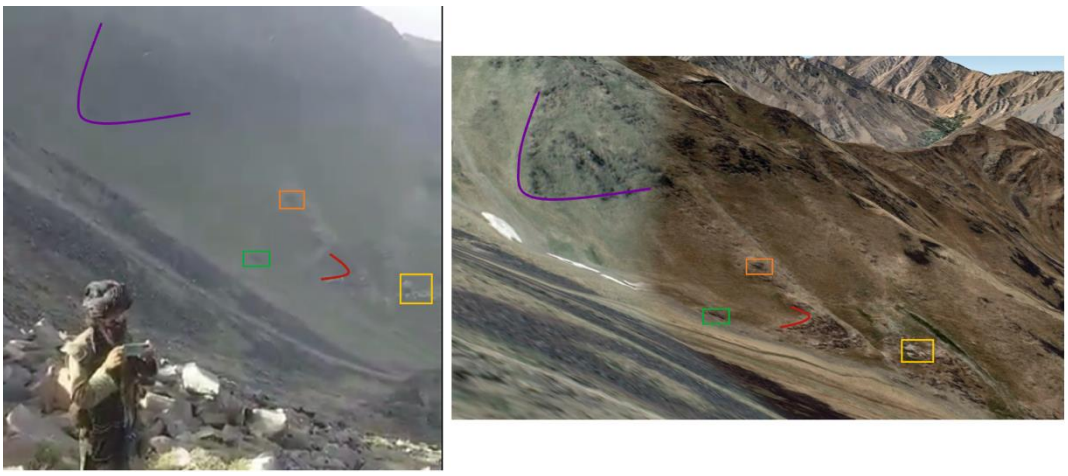

Figure: Features visible in Video D (highlighted left) matched on Google Earth (highlighted right) at the location [35.338321, 69.697990].

2. The march up the mountain and three more victims

On 13 September 2022, another video appeared on social media showing the same group of Taliban marching up a mountain with the captives, whose hands are bound behind their backs. The next day, a longer, higher-quality version of the same footage was posted **[WARNING: GRAPHIC]** (Video E). At the end of the video, they reach a ridge, and the filmer pans across, providing a panorama of the mountain top.

From the valley seen in the background of Video E as the Taliban climb, and the view across the mountain top, the footage can be confidently geolocated to the same mountain top as the execution, with the group and their captives arriving from the other side of the ridge only metres from the execution site. They walked up the mountain from the northeast, while the execution took place on the southwest slope.

The video appears to be filmed in the shade, and there are faint shadows from the fighters in the direction of the northwest. However, the end of the video shows a clear sky. This is consistent with the video being filmed very early in the morning, which supports the theory that the group was marched up the mountain immediately prior to their execution.

Figure: Features visible in Video E (highlighted left) matched on Google Earth (highlighted right) at the location [35.340015, 69.698210].

The captives seen being marched up the mountain can be matched to the five men seen in the videos of the execution and aftermath. Importantly, in addition to these five, Video E shows a sixth man among the captives. An **[WARNING: GRAPHIC]** image shared online on 14 September 2022 showed the dead body of this sixth man, alongside two other bodies, Victims 7 and 8.

Figure: Screenshots of Video E showing men being marched up a mountain (top) compared to screenshots from footage of the executions (bottom left) and footage of the bodies (bottom right)

Figure: Comparison of the sixth man marched up the mountain in Video E, compared to an image showing a deceased man (right) with the same clothes and features, alongside two corpses

AW was able to find footage (Video F), posted online on 14 September 2022, which shows Victim 7 and 8 being interrogated by the Taliban.

Figure: Comparison of the image showing three deceased men [including previously identified Victim 6] (left), compared to Video F showing the two men alive and captured by Taliban forces (right), who show the same identifying clothes and facial features

In the video, the Taliban fighters ask about resistance hideouts: *"You all talk to me and tell me about the hideout of your other fellow, I will release you. The other one told me about hideouts and I released him. If you do not tell me anything, I will kill you."* The man replies: *I swear to Allah that I do not know anything. You can kill but I am a Muslim and swear to Allah that I have not seen anything.* After which the Taliban says: *"You are a Muslim and you do not know anything? How many people were you?".* The man being questioned then counts to five.

One of the men questioning the captives is a Taliban fighter identified by AW as one of the shooters of the five executed men (seen in Video A). This confirms victims 7 and 8 were being held by the same group of fighters as victims 1-6.

Figure: Screen captures of a Taliban fighter discharging his weapon at five men (Video A: left 0:02, middle 0:05) compared to Video F of the interrogation of a further two men, later pictured dead [0:23].

The interpretation, sequencing, and geolocation of Video F in terms of the other execution is challenging and raises questions. The bodies of the two fighters being interrogated are found alongside Victim 6, who was marched up the mountain with Victims 1-5 but not executed alongside them.

The dialogue refers to five other resistance fighters, which could refer to the five executed men. However, it is not clear if the captive is saying there are five – *yet to be caught* – or if the Taliban fighters taunting the men had already killed five of their colleagues – "*How many people were you?*". The Taliban fighter also says they released one man for providing them information, which could possibly be a reference to Victim 6, who they may have pretended to release to try and get more information from the two other captives. It is not possible to address these questions from the currently available material.

The camera angle gives relatively limited views of the surroundings, however, the clues that can be seen are consistent with the mountaintop execution site. Brief glimpses of the horizon show it is likely at the top of a ridge, while a rock feature seen in the background is consistent with other footage that can be confidently located at the execution site.

Figure: Screenshots from Video F give limited clues on the location, but occasional glimpses of the horizon suggest it is at a mountaintop, and a partial view of a rock feature (indicated right) appears to match other videos confirmed at the execution site (next figure)

Another video (Video G), which is 01:20 in length, shows the large group of Taliban fighters and can be confidently geolocated to the execution site. Several fighters are seen standing in a group gathered around something, which cannot be seen in the footage. It is possible the fighters are gathered around the two captives, victims 7 and 8. The weather conditions, intensity and angle of the sun, and length of shadows are consistent with Video F - both appear to be recorded around 0800 local time.

Figure: Screen capture of Video E showing six men led up the mountain (left) compared to capture from Video G showing Taliban fighters at the execution location (right). The rock feature highlighted appears to be consistent with the rock feature visible in Video F (see figure above)

3. Fighters associated with the execution of a father and son

The group of Taliban fighters recorded executing the five men (Victims 1-5), and holding Victims 6-8, can also be confidently associated with the execution of two more men, claimed to be father and son.

Two videos shared by journalist Mukhtar Wafayee on September 13, 2022, first showed a man, allegedly a resistance fighter, being interrogated by the Taliban (Video H). The post claimed the man had been arrested two days previously (September 11) and "killed today" (September 13). A second, graphic video in the thread showed the body of the man, alongside another older man. The bodies are covered, but the filmer walks between the two victims, removing the cover to show their faces. The close-up video cannot be geolocated.

Other images found online showed the two men in captivity outside a building (with a third man), and in the back of a vehicle, also with buildings in view. It has not been possible to geolocate these images, but it is notable it is in a more developed area, not high in the mountains as in the previous case.

Figure: Footage showing two deceased men with gunshot wounds [left], compared to images showing the same two men alive and being held by the Taliban

The two men were claimed to be father and son, captured in the town of Omarz Doab, Khenj District. The town is located at the entrance to Dara District and situated at the bottom of the mountain range of the Dara-e-Hazara area, where the recent executions took place. This information could not be verified at the time of writing. There were also numerous claims from pro-Taliban social media

accounts that the younger man was French, apparently based solely on his appearance. AW has not found any additional evidence to support this claim.

Importantly, during the clip of the younger resistance fighter being interrogated, we get a brief but clear view of a Taliban fighter sitting next to him, forcefully patting him on the shoulder as he is questioned. The same Taliban fighter can be identified in footage from the mountain top execution in Pochaveh Valley, walking among the bodies of the executed men **[WARNING: GRAPHIC]** (Video I). This suggests the group of fighters who perpetrated the mountaintop execution was involved in executions elsewhere in the area around the same time.

Figure: Screen captures of a Taliban fighter with Victim 10 [left, Video H 0:19] and the same Taliban fighter at the execution location of the first five men [right, Video I 0:24]

4. Other claimed executions and deaths in Panjshir

In addition to the 10 executions covered above, AW has gathered evidence of a further 17 executions and 30 deaths that allegedly took place in Panjshir during the Taliban's anti-resistance effort in early September. This would bring the total number of possible deaths to 57.

The 17 images AW has classified as executions all show deceased males with their hands bound behind their backs. The other 30 cases show deceased males – including a young teenager - but there is no direct evidence of execution. Several of the photos show corpses in close proximity, and their body positions could indicate an execution-style death, but it could also be the result of fighting.

The close-up images cannot be geolocated or verified, but they are all unique and no earlier versions of the images can be found, or associations with other incidents, lending credibility to the claims.

Figure: Victims photographed with their hands tied behind their backs, indicating executions

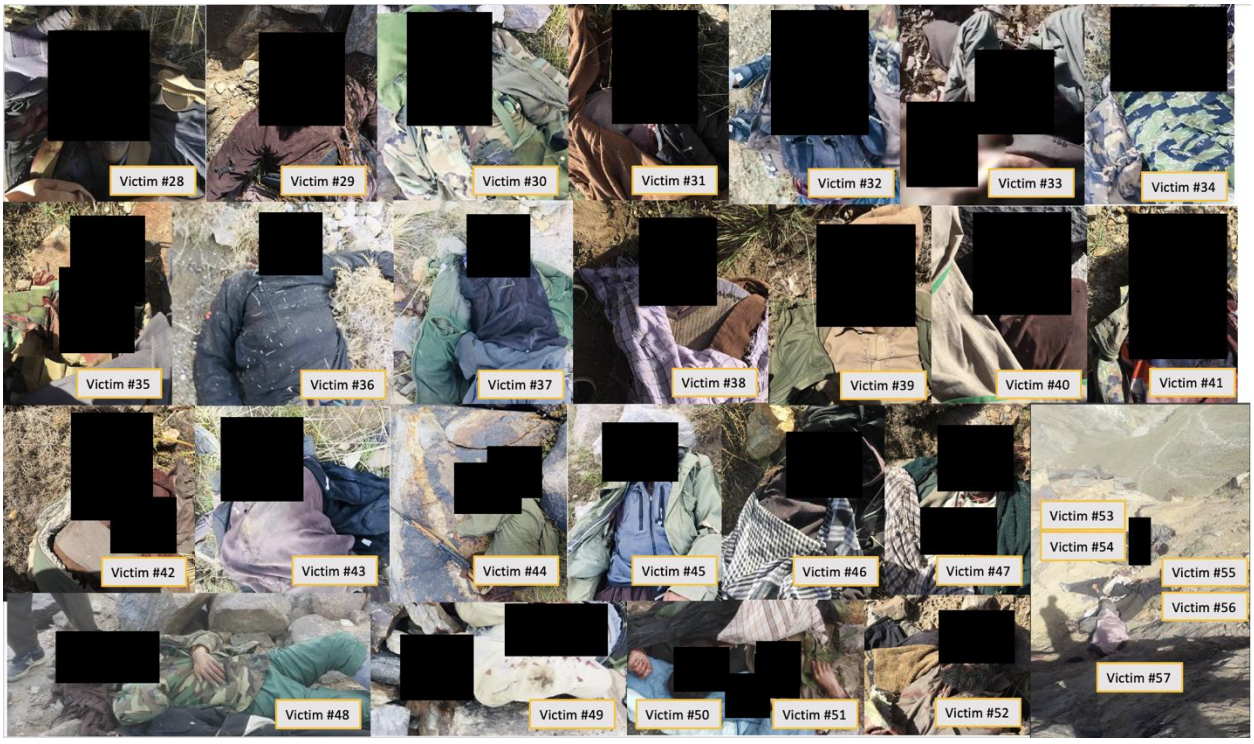

Figure: Photographs of further victims, allegedly killed during the recent offensive, though AW has not been able to geolocate or verify the images

5. Conclusion

Taliban central authorities were proud of the anti-resistance operation in Panjshir and made no secret of the relatively high death count. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid stated that 40 resistance fighters, including three commanders, were killed in the Rukha, Dara, and Afshar Districts of Panjshir, though no further details were given on the nature of the deaths.

Through open-source techniques, AW has shown one group of fighters is clearly responsible for the execution of five men – they are recorded in the act – and were holding five other men who were also executed. While the group is not recorded executing the second five, it is highly likely they were responsible.

Importantly, the group is shown to have had contact with executed resistance fighters from more than one location – Victims 9 and 10 are pictured in captivity next to a building and in the back of a vehicle prior to their execution. This shows that the executions were not a one-off incident or random event, but part of a series of events perpetrated by the group in the wider area, likely over the course of several days.

The movements of the Taliban within the Pochaveh Valley around the time (see Appendix B) show a systematic search effort, with Taliban geolocated at various points in the valley and wider area, including previously known resistance positions.

Sequencing and gaining a full understanding of the events is difficult from open source alone. The material that surfaced online was not posted chronologically or as it happened. The earliest postings of the content identified by AW are not from the original filmers. It is likely the damning videos of the execution and aftermath were circulated around private Taliban groups on closed social media, quickly spreading from group to group, until reaching a user who posts it on open social media.

There remain confusing aspects of the case, most notably the presence of Victim 6 alongside Victims 1-5 as they are marched up the mountain, but his apparent absence from the morning execution, only for his body to appear alongside Victims 7 and 8.

While we cannot fully reconstruct the locations or chronology of the ten killings, it is clear the same group of Taliban fighters was instrumental in all of them. With unverified evidence of up to 17 other executions and 30 other deaths, this raises strong questions over the extent of extrajudicial killings during the operation against resistance in Panjshir.

Finally, none of the videos show Taliban fighters out of control, agitated or uncomfortable with the events unfolding in front of them. The fighters are seen and heard laughing as they escort and interrogate distressed or defiant captives, take photos and long videos of the dead bodies, joking among themselves at the deceased – as though it was just any other day for a Taliban fighter in the Panjshir.

Appendix A: Key footage cited

Content	Date posted	Description	Verification notes
Video A [WARNING: GRAPHIC]	14 September 2022	Five men executed by Taliban fighters, filmed over the shoulder of one of the shooters.	Pochaveh Valley of the Dara-e-Hazara area, Dara District, Panjshir [35.338321, 69.697990]
Video B [WARNING: GRAPHIC]	13 September 2022	Executions filmed from a different angle, Taliban fighters opening fire on the men at close range.	Pochaveh Valley of the Dara-e-Hazara area, Dara District, Panjshir [35.338321, 69.697990]
Video C [WARNING: GRAPHIC]	13 September 2022	Several Taliban fighters around the bodies of the executed.	Same men as those executed in Video A. [35.340015, 69.698210]
Video D [WARNING: GRAPHIC]	12 September 2022	Five deceased men after execution by Taliban fighters.	Pochaveh Valley of the Dara-e-Hazara area, Dara District, Panjshir [35.338321, 69.697990]
Video E [WARNING: GRAPHIC]	13 September 2022	Six men who appear to have their hands tied behind their backs, being marched up a mountain by a group of Taliban fighters.	Same men as those executed in Video A. [35.340015, 69.698210]
Image [WARNING: GRAPHIC]	14 September 2022	Shows the sixth man executed, alongside two more deceased men.	Shows Victim #6 who also appears in Video E, as well as two men who also appear in Video F. Given the presence of Victim #6 in video D, it is likely the men were executed at the same location as the other five.
Video F	14 September 2022	Shows the two men - seen in the above image - alive and captured by the Taliban in an unknown location in Panjshir.	Indicates the two men seen deceased in the image above were executed after capture, not killed in battle.

Video G	14 September 2022	A large group of Taliban fighters at the execution location. Several Taliban fighters gathered around, looking at something which is not visible in the footage - possibly the two captive men seen in video F.	Geolocated to the same location as video E. Possibly recorded around the same time as video F, 0800 local time.
Video H	14 September 2022	Taliban fighter with a man later seen deceased.	The same Taliban fighter is also visible at the execution location of the five men seen in video I.
Video I [WARNING: GRAPHIC]	12 September 2022	Taliban fighters at the execution location of the five men.	Pochaveh Valley of the Dara-e-Hazara area, Dara District, Panjshir [35.338321, 69.697990]. The Taliban fighter visible is the same fighter as visible in video H.
Video J (original post deleted, but archived by AW)	13 September 2022	A group of Taliban fighters recorded at an overrun resistance location.	Geolocated to a previously verified resistance location in the Pochaveh Valley of Dara District, Panjshir [35.347299, 69.669500]. The Taliban group recorded are the same group involved in the executions.

Appendix B: Recent resistance and Taliban activity in the area of executions

Resistance activity

The executions took place in an area that has seen recently verified resistance activity. On 10 August 2022 and 13 August 2022, footage was shared on social media indicating renewed resistance activity in the Panjshir Valley. After analysis, AW was able to geolocate the area targeted by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) to a village in the Pochaveh Valley of Dara District, Panjshir, as well as resistance forces firing mortar rounds from a mountaintop. The mortar fire was geolocated to the same valley of Pochaveh, Dara District [35.326958, 69.659349].

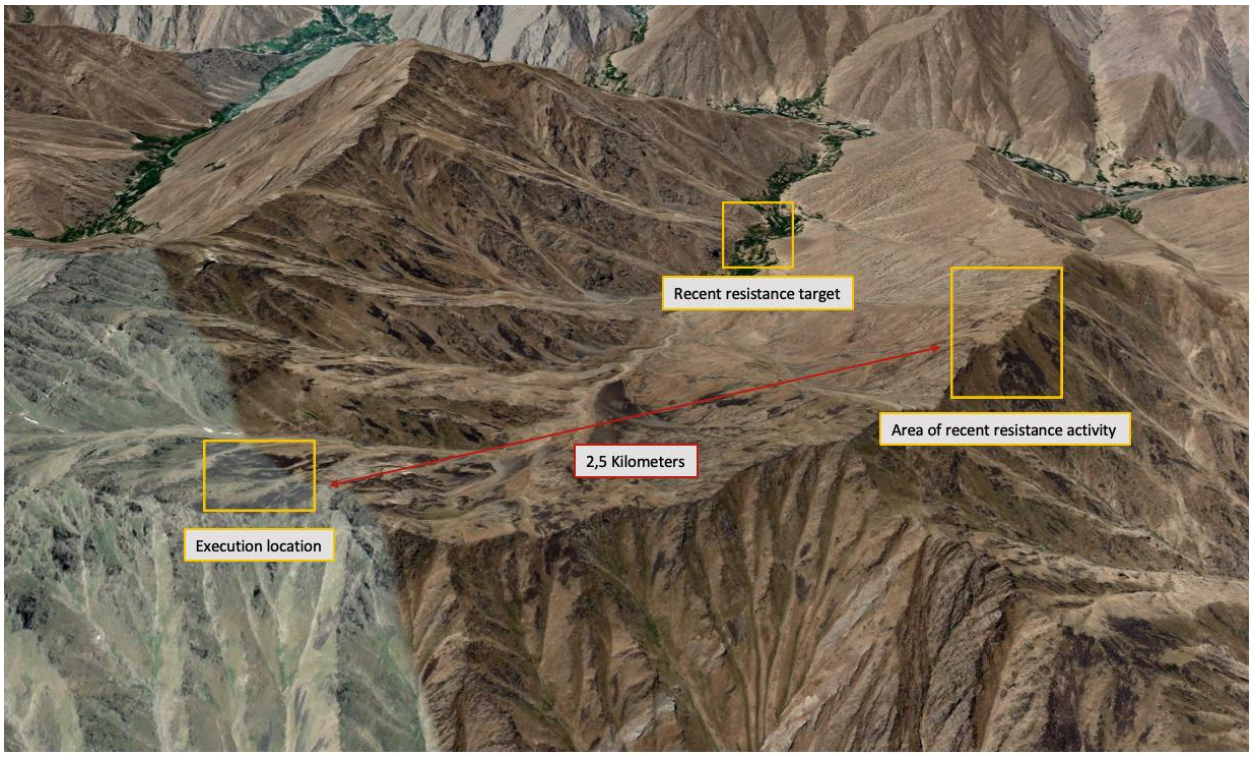

Figure: Overview of activity around Pochaveh Valley, Dara District, Panjshir, showing resistance positions near the recent execution location of the five men.

On 8 September 2022, further resistance activity was verified to have taken place in the same mountain range, on the border of the Dara and Khenj districts. The footage shared online shows a group of resistance fighters using a 107mm Chinese 85 single-tube launcher with Type 63-2 HE rockets [the same weaponry used by the resistance fighters in above mentioned Pochaveh Valley].

Figure: Geolocation of footage showing resistance fighters firing a rocket at an alleged Taliban position in the valley, Khenj District, Panjshir [35.377429, 69.641739]

A single-tube launch weapons system used by resistance fighters to target towns in Pochaveh Valley and Khenj District in recent weeks was reportedly captured by Taliban fighters in the recent sweep when it was claimed many resistance fighters were killed.

Figure: Footage showing Taliban fighters with reportedly captured resistance weaponry [left] compared to footage of resistance fighters using the same weapon to target towns in Pochaveh Valley and Khenj District, Panjshir.

Taliban movements in the valley

On 13 September 2022, one day after the first footage (Video D) of the executions appeared online, footage [Video J] was shared showing Taliban fighters at a mountaintop in Panjshir province. AW investigators geolocated the footage to the edge of Pochaveh Valley, Dara District, which is approximately 2 kilometres from the location where the five men were executed.

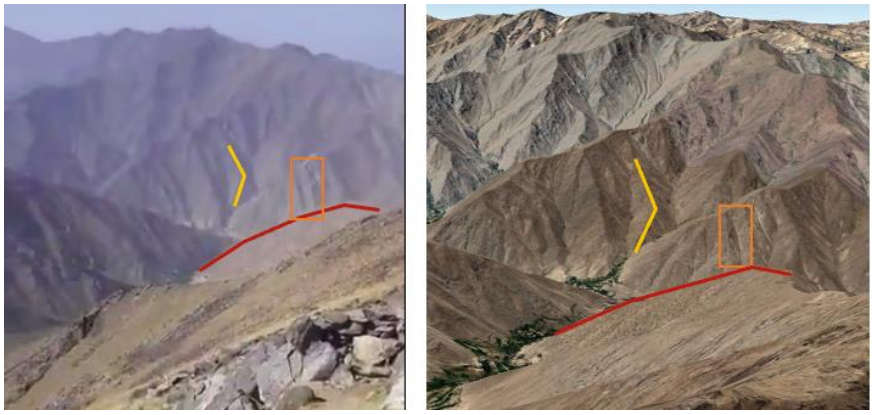

Figure: Geolocation of Video J showing Taliban fighters at a previously verified resistance location in the Pochaveh Valley of Dara District, Panjshir [35.347299, 69.669500].

Video J was geolocated to the same location from which resistance fighters targeted the Pochaveh Valley floor on 10 August 2022 and 13 August 2022. This indicates that the Taliban had overrun this resistance position roughly a month later, around the time of the executions.

Figure: Footage showing resistance fighters at a fighting position in August [left] compared to footage showing Taliban fighters at the same position in September [right, Video J] in the Pochaveh Valley of Dara District, Panjshir [35.347299, 69.669500].

Importantly, fighters visible in Video J can be matched to fighters later seen at the mountaintop execution. This allows us to be confident the same wider group of fighters was involved in capturing the resistance location and execution.

Figure: Screen captures of a Taliban fighter at an overrun resistance location [left, Video J 0:30] and the same Taliban fighter at the execution location [right, Video G 0:43]

On 13 September 2022, another image was shared, showing Taliban fighters inside a valley in Panjshir province. AW geolocated the footage near the valley floor of Pochaveh Valley, Dara District, in the area that was previously targeted by resistance fighters from the mountaintop position.

Figure: Geolocation of image showing Taliban fighters in the Pochaveh Valley of Dara District, Panjshir, near last known resistance locations [35.332285, 69.664647]

On 16 September 2022 an image was shared on social media showing Taliban fighters above the main valley floor of Panjshir Valley, Khenj District. The image was geolocated near another resistance position which was used to target Khenj District in footage shared on 8 September 2022, as well as the area which had audible clashes on 20 August 2022.

Figure: Geolocation of image showing Taliban fighters in the Khenj District, Panjshir, near last known resistance locations [35.378853, 69.647253].

The newly uncovered footage of Taliban fighters in Panjshir province places Taliban fighters on both sides of the last known resistance locations in Dara District, indicating the Taliban were systematically searching the area of resistance activity in the Dara-e-Hazara area of the Dara-Khenj districts around the time of the executions.

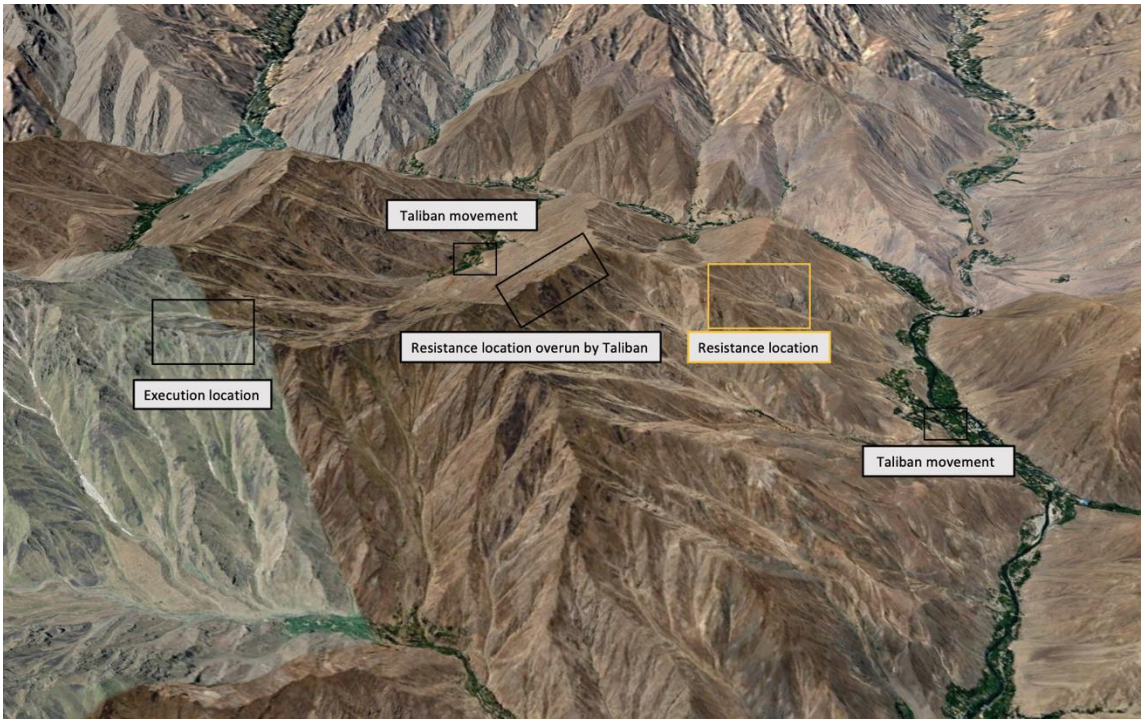

Figure: Overview of Taliban's confirmed movements near resistance positions in the Dara-e-Hazara area of Dara-Khenj districts, Panjshir