

Evidence of Potential Mass Graves in Sheberghan

Sheberghan, Jowzjan Province, northern Afghanistan

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Background

In November 2001, U.S.-allied Afghan forces transported a group of surrendered Taliban fighters and others, estimated at up to 2,000 people, to prison in container trucks. During the journey, the prisoners are believed to have been killed, either shot or suffocated. Their remains are believed to have been subsequently buried in a mass grave at Dasht-e-Leili, just west of Sheberghan, the capital of Jowzjan Province in northern Afghanistan. The existence of the mass grave was confirmed through a forensic investigation conducted in 2002, and the case has been documented and reported on by several sources, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), and the United Nations. While a full excavation of the site was never completed (PHR's 2002 investigation exhumed only 15 remains and performed autopsies on 3) witness testimony and U.S. government documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests have suggested a death toll of up to 2,000 people.

Post-2009, reporting and discussion surrounding the mass graves near Sheberghan has largely focused on already-confirmed grave sites and follow-up investigations into them, rather than the discovery of new ones. In the years following, evidence of multiple potential locations of mass graves have appeared in satellite data, none of which have been investigated or reported on until now.

Grave Site 1:C

36°39'26.07"N 65°42'24.41"E

Grave Site 1 encompasses three distinct sites of interest, designated 1:A, 1:B, and 1:C. Sites 1:A and 1:B were formally identified as mass graves prior to 2009 and have been the subject of prior documentation and reporting. These two sites established a pattern of disturbance characteristic of the area.



Satellite imagery of Grave Site 1 from 2009 and 2013, showing the appearance of site 1:C.

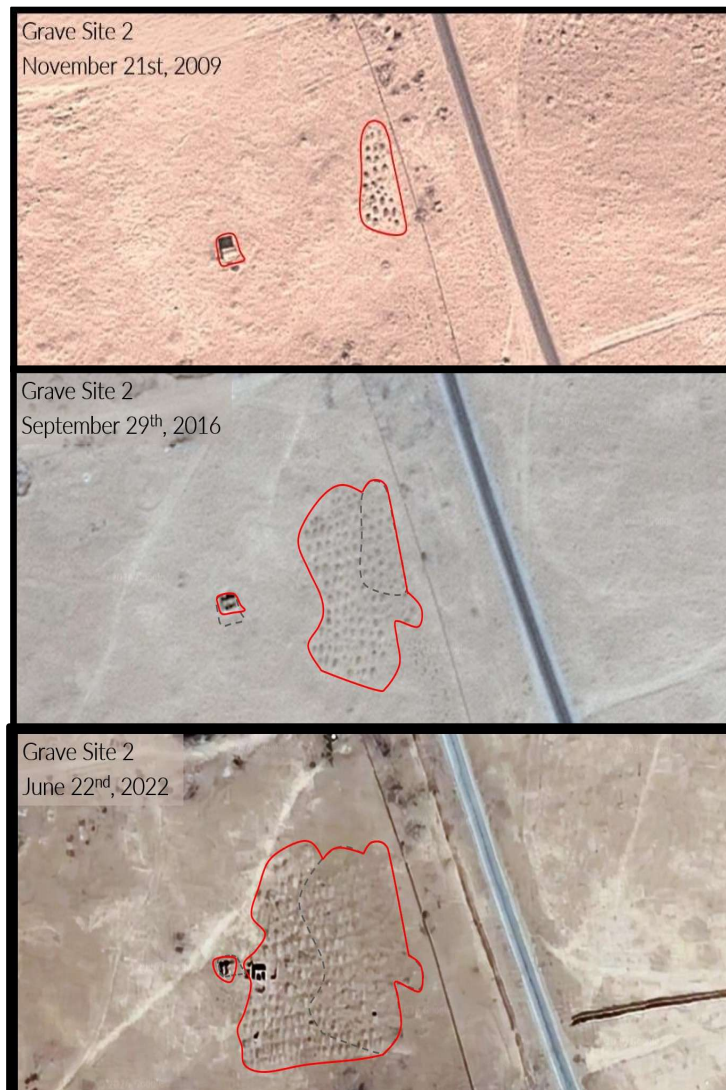
Upon analysis of 2013 satellite imagery, a third anomaly (designated Site 1:C) was identified within the same geographic area, exhibiting visual characteristics strikingly similar to those of the previously documented sites. Despite its apparent consistency with the established markers of a mass grave, Site 1:C has yet to be the subject of any formal reporting, public investigation, or official acknowledgment. The absence of any documented inquiry into this potential gravesite represents a significant gap in the broader investigative record.

Grave site 2

36°39'36.19"N 65°42'19.86"E

Less than 300m north of Grave Site 1 is what appears to be a burial ground that slowly grow between 2009 to 2022. Despite the proximity to the two known and third potential mass grave, the growth of the Grave Site 2 seems consistent with that of a normal cemetery rather than a mass grave. Additionally, the burials face the correct direction to be in line with local burial customs.

Located less than 300 meters north of Grave Site 1 lies what appears to be a distinct and separate burial ground, designated Grave Site 2. Analysis of satellite imagery spanning 2009 to 2022 reveals a gradual and steady expansion of this site over the course of thirteen years. The incremental nature of its growth is more consistent with that of a conventional cemetery than with the rapid, large-scale interments associated with mass burials.



Satellite imagery from 2009, 2016, and 2022, showing the growth of Grave Site 2.

Despite its close proximity to the two formally identified mass graves at Site 1:A and 1:B, as well as the third unacknowledged anomaly at Site 1:C, the character of Grave Site 2 appears to differ meaningfully from its neighbors. Grave Site 2 shows a number of small disturbances that appear consistent with the measurements of individual graves, a large contrast to the large disturbances observed at Grave Site 1. Additionally, the orientation of the burials at Grave Site 2 appears to align with the direction of Mecca, making them consistent with Islamic burial customs practiced in the region, wherein the deceased are traditionally laid to rest facing the Qibla. This adherence to local funerary tradition further supports the assessment that Grave Site 2 represents a civilian burial ground rather than a site of atrocity, however, its proximity to sites of serious concern means that independent ground verification cannot be overlooked. Confirmation through formal investigation would only strengthen the integrity of the broader findings.

Grave Site 3

36°39'21.47"N 65°45'30.19"E

The third potential gravesite remains the most enigmatic of the three locations identified in this investigation. Unlike the previous two sites, which were situated on the outskirts of Sheberghan, Grave Site 3 is located in the heart of the city, positioned adjacent to an established cemetery whose own history is difficult to verify through available records. Roughly half of said cemetery appears to simply vanish between 2009 and 2013. No publicly available reports, official statements, or investigative records offer any explanation for this disappearance, and the cleared land shows no identifiable subsequent use.



Satellite imagery from 2009 and 2013, showing the disappearance of half the of the cemetery at Grave Site 3.

It is worth noting that this four-year window coincides with the period during which Grave Site 1:C appears in the imagery record. The temporal overlap invites speculation about whether these changes might be connected, however, given the absence of documentation on either location and the considerable gap in time, any such connection remains impossible to establish with confidence.

For years following the initial clearing, satellite imagery shows very little activity on the land. That changes on August 13th, 2022, when 3-4 trenches approximately 10 meters in length appear in the imagery. Imagery from October 6th, 2022, shows further disturbance to the area, with evidence of construction vehicle activity (unidentifiable rectangular shapes measuring between 5 and 10 meters in length) which could be filling the trenches in, as they disappear in all imagery afterwards. No public record exists explaining what these trenches were dug for or what was placed or removed from them.



Satellite imagery from 2022 through 2023, showing the appearance and disappearance of trenches at Grave Site 3.

Less malicious explanations such as routine construction, plot dividers, utility work, or similar activity are all possibilities worth acknowledging, however, several factors make it difficult to dismiss more serious concerns. Aside from the site being directly adjacent to an established graveyard, 2023 imagery shows no additional structures or features that would

support a construction explanation, and the surrounding area remains bare, with no buildings or infrastructure typically associated with legitimate development.

These factors, considered together, warrant continued monitoring. Regular satellite imagery review and additional investigative follow-up are advisable. The questions surrounding this site remain open, and the pattern of activity is not one that should be quietly set aside.

Final Thoughts

Afghanistan has become one of the most catastrophically neglected human rights crises in the world, shielded from sustained global scrutiny by the dominance of other conflicts and geopolitical flashpoints in the international news cycle. Since the Taliban retook power in August 2021, the atrocities committed within the country's borders have been staggering in both scale and cruelty, yet the world has largely looked away.

Under Taliban rule, the people of Afghanistan face violence, famine, mass arrests, mass executions, and significant curtailment of their rights and freedoms. Witnesses throughout the country have reported public executions, as well as people being arrested and never seen again. Among the most disturbing emerging evidence are reports of mass graves linked to the killing of hundreds of Tajik people, cases that are now the subject of active investigation. Media restrictions, political oppression, and intimidation have led to many such incidents going unreported to the rest of the world; however, the evidence of the atrocities lies in plain sight.

With witness accounts of mass graves mounting and hundreds of victims still unaccounted for, it is critical that all evidence of potential mass killings be investigated thoroughly. The victims of these crimes deserve a record, and the world has an obligation to ensure one exists.

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