



The Killing of ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi: An Initial Assessment

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The US operation

US officials first briefed President Joe Biden over a month ago about the ongoing operation to track and target ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. The route leading to al-Qurayshi's last location was known by US military intelligence analysts for at least several months.

The president ordered the Pentagon on February 1 to proceed with the strike in a ground operation instead of an airstrike to protect civilians living in the same residential building as al-Qurayshi, who did not have any affiliation with ISIS.

US forces entered the building in the Syrian-Turkish border city of Atmeh, in the rebel Syrian enclave of Idlib, after midnight on February 3, and evacuated one man, one woman, and multiple children from the first floor early in the operation. American officials did not know who lived on the building's third floor. Troops also alerted residents that an operation was underway as the raid began to ensure they did not unintentionally interfere.

When military forces confronted al-Qurayshi on the second floor of the building, he detonated an explosion that killed his wife and children. The blast destroyed much of the third floor and threw bodies from the building.

According to the [Syrian civil defense group, the White Helmets](#), there were at least 13 fatalities during the raid, including six children and four women.

Sources say that coalition helicopters, which took part in the operation near Atmeh, took off from [the former American base Kharab Ishik](#), east of the Kurdish border town of Kobane. This is the first time the Americans have returned on an operational mission to a base they abandoned in 2019 as part of an evacuation move in northeastern Syria.

No American troops were killed or injured in the raid. An American helicopter had a mechanical issue and was destroyed away from the operation site.

It should be noted that in October 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former caliph of ISIS, [also detonated a suicide vest](#) when he was cornered by American troops in the same area in the Idlib province.

The Regional Aspects

The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham factor

The Atmeh area has a heavy presence of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces formerly affiliated with al Qaeda. Turkish-backed fighters also control portions of the province.

Some reports indicate that HTS blocked off the roads leading to the site of yesterday's US raid, raising questions about whether the group knew of the operation in advance or even provided intelligence that enabled it. In 2019, HTS did not interfere with the US raid against Baghdadi, though no evidence has emerged that the group had any knowledge of his whereabouts.

According to an interesting report by Aaron Y. Zelin, Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, [HTS and its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, have sought to garner support from the United States](#) over the past year or two in a bid to get themselves removed from terrorist lists.

In a spring 2021 interview, former US special representative James Jeffrey noted that he had engaged with the group via backchannels while serving in President Trump's State Department. He also noted that Washington had stopped targeting Jawlani in August 2018. In his view, HTS was "the least bad option of the various options on Idlib, and Idlib is one of the most important places in Syria, which is one of the most important places right now in the Middle East."

Biden administration officials have been relatively quiet about their policy toward HTS. It would be useful for the US government, recommends Zelin, to clarify its relations with HTS and state whether it views the group as a counterterrorism partner.

Russia

According to one US defense official, [the United States coordinated with Russia to deconflict airspace](#) to conduct the raid that killed al-Qurayshi in northwest Syria. "The US told Russia it would be operating in a broad general area of northwest Syria, during a timeframe and told them to stay out of the area," reported CNN.

Israel

[According to the Israeli Kan public broadcaster](#), Jerusalem, which was familiar with al-Qurayshi because he once held the 'Israel file' in ISIS, was reportedly notified in advance of the raid to take him out and helped track his location.

As Russian and Israeli air forces are heavily involved in operational activity in Syria, this was a natural and needed coordination effort to avoid unnecessary incidents between opposed and allied military in a period of high tension in Syria itself ([Syrian and Russian military jets jointly patrolled](#) the airspace along Syria's borders on January 24 for the first time) and systematic Israeli airstrikes against Iranian, Hezbollah and pro-Iranian Shiite militias targets.

Iraq

Iraqi intelligence provided the US with "accurate" information in the operation against the ISIS leader in Syria, leading to his location and death, [military spokesperson for the Iraqi prime minister claimed](#). "The operation ... was carried out after the Iraqi National Intelligence Service provided the global coalition with accurate information which led to his location and killing," Yehia Rasool, military spokesperson for Iraqi PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is also the commander-in-chief of armed forces, said in a tweet.

The Kurdistan Region officials welcomed the killing of the ISIS leader, with PM Masrour Barzani urging the global coalition against ISIS to continue training and equipping the Peshmerga and Iraqi army. US President Joe Biden said that the US "will continue working with our close allies and partners - the Syrian

Democratic Forces, Iraqi security forces, including the Kurdish Peshmerga - and more than 80 members of the global coalition.”

Turkey

Since the operation was close to the Turkish Iskendron province, the operation likely required coordination with the intelligence in Ankara.

It is of note that al-Qurayshi was living so close to the Turkish border, an area where more than 10,000 Turkish soldiers are staying. He was probably involved personally in the events leading to the attack of Sina'a prison in Hasakah. This is also a densely populated area with camps that may be used for camouflage and as an action for jihadist activity. Tens of thousands of people displaced by the country's decade-long war live in camps that dot the area.

Turkey took advantage of the event to publicize its criticism of American presence in the region, which gives a strategic umbrella to the Kurdish forces abhorred by the Erdogan regime.

Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesperson Tanju Bilgiç issued a statement noting that [Turkey plays an active role in the fight against Daesh](#) and “the deviant mentality it represents.” He stressed that all terrorist groups should be fought without discrimination, including Daesh, the PKK, and “the Gülenist Terror Group (FETÖ), which orchestrated the defeated coup of July 15, 2016, in Turkey.”

Prospective ISIS Activity and Redeployment

The US raid comes as [parts of Syria and Iraq have seen an ISIS resurgence](#). On January 10, over 100 ISIS fighters attacked Sina'a prison, located in the northeastern Syrian city of Hasakah, in an attempt to free 3500 jailed members of the group. At least 200 prison inmates and 30 security forces died in the clashes that followed the thwarted jailbreak.

Some 11,000 to 12,000 ISIS fighters are held in prisons and detention camps in northern Syria run by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-led dominant military force in the region and a key US partner in the fight against ISIS. This attack underlined concerns that the terror group could be quietly resurging.

The battle for [the liberation of thousands of ISIS imprisoned fighters](#) has lasted more than two weeks. It has been the largest, deadliest battle with ISIS since the defeat of the Caliphate nearly three years ago.

As fighting entered its third day, American and British ground forces joined the fray, deploying Bradley Fighting Vehicles to bolster SDF efforts to seal off the conflict area. The U.S.-led coalition carried out a series of airstrikes while inside the prison, SDF forces battled to regain control but faced stiff resistance from militants who held staff hostage. The SDF even introduced its Soviet-era T-62 tanks into the battle.

The release of the prisoners in this massive surprise operation was supposed to mimic what Abu-Bakar al-Baghdadi did in 2012-2013 and could have allowed al-Qurayshi to use the thousands of freed prisoners to bolster ISIS capabilities, to carry out more sophisticated, large-scale operations and recapture

some of the territory he lost in 2018, out of an assessment that the Americans and Kurds were debilitated on the ground.

The Islamic State of Iraq's ["Breaking the Walls" campaign from 2012-2013](#) enabled the Caliphate's rise by freeing hundreds of fighters from prisons across Iraq: in Kirkuk, Tikrit, Taji, Abu Ghraib, and other facilities that released hundreds of senior- and mid-level ISIS militants. By the end of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, the Islamic State of Iraq had restored its ranks with hundreds of previously detained, skilled operatives, setting the stage for its resurgence and the transition into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Due to its success and strategic importance, the Islamic State's jailbreak strategy can be considered part of the group's organizational fabric.

Al-Qurayshi was appointed ISIS leader more than two years ago, following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He was known as a politically savvy religious scholar. Just days after he assumed the role, other jihadis in the region derided him as a ["secluded paper caliph" and "an unknown nobody."](#)

"We think the impact of (Al-Qurayshi) is going to be a blow to ISIS," a senior US official said, saying the terrorist "was heavily involved in running many of the operations." Officials said he oversaw ISIS branches abroad — including the one in Afghanistan responsible for the deaths of American Marines last year — and played [a critical role in the genocide of the Yazidi ethnic minority](#).

The killing of al-Qurayshi, so close to the partly successful attack on the Sana'a prison, the death of many of the fighters, and the important information from ISIS attackers who penetrated the prison and were captured could provide to the coalition forces, will most probably mitigate the effect of that event.

Al-Qurayshi's tenure as "terrorist chief" was spent entirely in hiding, as the [Islamic State's core area in Iraq and Syria was reduced to a scattering of underground cells](#) that carried out occasional attacks against security forces and then retreated. More recently, the group appeared to be on the rebound. Its network of regional affiliates in Africa has been steadily gaining strength, while its fighters in Iraq and Syria had begun staging increasingly elaborate and ambitious attacks, including last month's massive assault on the Hasakah prison. ISIS-Khorasan has also been successful in challenging the new rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan

Whether al-Qurayshi personally directed the Hasakah assault is unknown, but his death is, at a minimum, a severe psychological setback at a moment when the terrorist group was attempting to regain its footing, counterterrorism officials and independent experts say. "It is certainly a blow to the morale boost that followed the Hasakah prison break."

There was no immediate confirmation or comment on al-Qurayshi's death from the Islamic State and no public suggestions on his possible replacement. Terrorism experts said it would likely be months before a new caliph is announced. Early speculation about Baghdadi's potential successor in 2019 turned out to be inaccurate.

Michael Barak, a senior researcher at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Herzliya, [evaluated that it can be expected](#) that the Sunni Islamists will try to hit back. “We have to wait and see if ISIS will confirm this assassination, and then they will probably launch a series of attacks on Western targets in the Middle East,” he said.

This author evaluates that despite possible expected attacks against US and Western targets, the effect of the latest events in the short term depends on the will of the coalition to invest more professional elite forces on the ground, intelligence activity, and political and economic support to the moderate elements in both Syria and Iraq, meaning the Kurdish forces and hopefully [a more moderate pro-Western government in Iraq](#).

ISIS will probably become a more decentralized organization, fighting in Western and Central Africa in competition with the al-Qaeda factions present there, and in Afghanistan in competition with Taliban and what remains of al-Qaeda Central.

Regional and Global Implications

Although the killing of the leader of ISIS seems to be only a local successful commando operation, albeit meaningful on the political and promotional levels, it provides an opportunity for President Biden to enhance his image in the regional and global arenas after the Afghanistan debacle.

In Syria, the success of this operation highlights that the US is ready to continue its military presence, its support to the Kurdish allies, challenge of Turkish and Syrian regime pressures, Iranian and Hezbollah presences, and if necessary, even Russian adventurism.

Coupled with his decision to deploy more than 3,000 American troops to bolster the defense of European allies, Biden can even hint at a new assertiveness in the explosive Ukraine crisis.

Finally, like in the case of the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin-Laden during President Obama’s tenure, or that of ISIS’s leader Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi during President Trump’s administration, President Biden’s internal political position can only be enhanced by the success of the operation he ordered.