

EXHIBIT A



July 14, 2021

Dear U.S. CENTCOM FOIA Coordinator,

This is an urgent request under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (“FOIA”), with a request for expedited processing.

REQUEST:

I am a reporter for National Public Radio, Inc. (NPR). On behalf of myself and NPR, I hereby request a copy of the credibility assessment (CIVCAS CCAR) or Commander-Directed Investigation (CDI/AR15-6) records regarding allegations of civilian harm resulting from the October 26-27, 2019 CENTCOM operation in northwestern Syria to capture or kill ISIS founder and leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. (Capt. Bill Urban, Director of Communication Integration in U.S. Central Command, told NPR by phone that the CIVCAS CCAR report labels the operation with the date Oct. 27, 2019.)

This request seeks all enclosures, exhibits and attachments in these records, and all evidence reviewed in relation to the allegations, including but not limited to the following: closure report records, solatia assessment, ex-gratia assessment, open source information, assessments by US intelligence and fires professionals, legal review, video and full motion video footage, photos, post-strike imagery, screenshots and other images.

The time period for responsive records is from Oct. 26, 2019 to the date upon which your search is conducted.

In order to facilitate the location of responsive records related to this incident, please see the following Department of Defense and CENTCOM releases and emails identifying the incident in question and the existence of the records I am requesting:



EXHIBIT A: Oct. 30, 2019 defense.gov transcript, describing the raid and the van targeted. (with reference to the van on pages 6-7). “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Jonathan Rath Hoffman and General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command”

EXHIBIT B: Nov. 20, 2019 email from a U.S. Defense Official noting “Surveillance footage will be reviewed to determine if an investigation needs to be opened”

EXHIBIT C: Feb. 20, 2020 email from Capt. Bill Urban noting that CENTCOM had initiated a credibility assessment.

EXHIBIT D: July 13, 2020 email from Maj. Beth Riordan with statement by Capt. Bill Urban regarding the completion of the credibility assessment.

EXHIBIT E: July 30, 2020 email from Maj. Beth Riordan with statement by Capt. Bill Urban citing the following evidence reviewed as part of the credibility assessment: *“We conducted a full and thorough review of all available evidence related to this allegation, to include open source information; assessments by our intelligence and fires professionals; and a legal review.”*

As the FOIA requires, please release all reasonably segregable, nonexempt portions of responsive records. If you choose to deny any portion of my request, please provide a written explanation for the denial, including a reference to the specific statutory exemption(s) authorizing the withholding of all or part of the record, as well as an explanation of why USCENTCOM “reasonably foresees that disclosure would harm an interest” protected by that exemption or why “disclosure is prohibited by law[.]” 5 U.S.C. § 552 (a)(8).

Please provide all responsive records in electronic format.

**FEE CATEGORIZATION AND WAIVER REQUEST:**

In order to help you determine my status to assess fees, I wish to inform you that I am a correspondent with NPR (National Public Radio). This request is made in connection with NPR's ongoing journalistic work, not for commercial use.

In addition, I am requesting a waiver of all fees associated with this request per 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 32 C.F.R. § 286.12. As noted above I am a reporter seeking these records for dissemination to the general public through NPR's reporting, not for a commercial use. See OMB Uniform Freedom of Information Act Fee Schedule and Guidelines, 52 Fed. Reg. 10019 ("a request for records supporting the news dissemination of the requester shall not be considered to be a request that is for the commercial use.").

Additionally, disclosure of this information is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the federal government, specifically CENTCOM's overall efforts to investigate allegations of civilian casualties resulting from its operations in Syria and Iraq.

EXPEDITED PROCESSING REQUEST:

Per 5 U.S.C. § 552(A)(6)(E)(v) and 32 C.F.R. § 286.8(e)(3), I certify that this statement of compelling need for expedited processing is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. There is a compelling need for expedited processing of this request, for the following three reasons:

- I. **A "failure to obtain requested records on an expedited basis . . . could reasonably be expected to pose an imminent threat to the life or physical safety of an individual[.]" 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(E)(v)(I).**

The response to this request has a direct and immediate impact on the physical safety of Barakat Barakat, the survivor injured in this incident,



and the family members of Khaled Abdel Majid Qurmo and Khaled Mustafa Qurmo, who were killed in this incident. As a result of the high-profile nature of this operation, these people may be perceived by some local authorities and rogue militias as suspected ISIS members and thus fear reprisal violence.

For example, Barakat Barakat, a survivor of the Oct 26-27, 2019 US strike, told me NPR believes he could face reprisals. See quote from NPR report (**EXHIBIT F**): *“Barakat...said there is a risk Syrian armed groups might retaliate against him, suspecting him of connections with ISIS or another armed group because he was targeted by U.S. forces.”*

Without expedited processing of this request so that NPR may publish news stories based on it, these survivors and surviving family members may reasonably face imminent threats to their safety and life, as demonstrated in the New York Times Magazine report, “The Uncounted” (**EXHIBIT G**), which demonstrated how civilians who have survived CENTCOM combat operations can often as a result be perceived to be ISIS sympathizers and face the threat of reprisal violence from rogue militias or security forces.

See quote about Basim Razzo, an Iraqi survivor of a US-led coalition airstrike, in the New York Times Magazine report (**EXHIBIT G**): *“Around the city, residents were living under a pall of suspicion that they were Islamic State sympathizers, a target for rogue militias and vengeful security forces, and Basim was eager to move north to Erbil. This was another reason he was determined to meet the Americans — not only for compensation but also for a letter attesting to their mistake, to certify that he did not belong to ISIS.”*

With no discernible path for foreign civilians to inform the public that they were not complicit with ISIS, and that they merely were civilian bystanders in the CENTCOM operation, it often falls to the news media to publish that information and the evidence these bystanders point to for support.



- II. “[F]ailure to obtain the requested information on an expedited basis could reasonably be expected to harm substantial humanitarian interests.” 32 C.F.R. 286.8(e)(1)(ii)(B). For the reasons described below in Section III(1), expedited processing is also warranted under this standard.
- III. I am a person “primarily engaged in disseminating information,” and there is an “urgency to inform the public concerning actual or alleged Federal Government activity.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(E)(v)(II).

There is widespread and well-documented public interest in this combat operation that resulted in the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and any related civilian casualties resulting from it, as well as public concern about lack of transparency regarding any assessment determining whether these civilian casualty allegations have been found credible. Given that such assessments or investigations have recently been completed, there is an urgency to release these records now.

See:

EXHIBIT H (Wikipedia entry “Death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” which extensively details NPR’s reporting under subheading “Possible civilian casualties”)

EXHIBIT I (Twitter thread of New York Times Magazine contributing writer Azmat Khan, who has 65,600 Twitter followers, about NPR’s report on CENTCOM’s credibility assessment into claims of civilian casualties in the al-Baghdadi raid)

EXHIBIT J (an NPR announcement on the national Edward R. Murrow journalism award for Hard News given for NPR’s Dec. 3, 2019 report, “Syrians Say Innocent Civilians Were Killed In U.S. Raid On Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi,” aired nationally to millions of listeners on NPR’s *All Things Considered*.)



FINAL SUMMARY OF ATTACHED EXHIBITS

EXHIBIT A: Oct. 30, 2019 defense.gov transcript, describing the raid and the van targeted. “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Jonathan Rath Hoffman and General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command”

EXHIBIT B: Nov. 20, 2019 email from a U.S. Defense Official noting “Surveillance footage will be reviewed to determine if an investigation needs to be opened”

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EXHIBIT F: NPR report Oct. 27, 2020: “Pentagon Says 2 Men Killed In Baghdadi Raid Were Combatants But Offers Little Evidence”

EXHIBIT G: New York Times Magazine report Nov. 16, 2017: “The Uncounted”

EXHIBIT H: Wikipedia entry “Death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi” and subheading “Possible civilian casualties” (pg. 9 of document)



EXHIBIT I: Twitter thread of New York Times investigative journalist Azmat Khan

EXHIBIT J: NPR announcement Oct 14, 2020 on Edward R. Murrow journalism award for Dec. 3, 2017 NPR report on al-Baghdadi raid

CONCLUSION

Please provide electronic copies of any responsive records to me at my email address, hwang@npr.org, including any links for download.

If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact me by email or by phone at (202) 513-3435.

I look forward to receiving your determination with respect to my request for expedited processing within 10 calendar days, as required by FOIA. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Hansi Lo Wang
NPR National Correspondent
hwang@npr.org
(202) 513-3435

EXHIBIT A:

Oct. 30, 2019 defense.gov transcript,
describing the raid and the van targeted.

“Department of Defense Press Briefing
by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense
for Public Affairs Jonathan Rath Hoffman
and General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.,
Commander, United States Central
Command”

Department of Defense Press Briefing by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Jonathan Rath Hoffman and General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command

OCT. 30, 2019

Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Jonathan R. Hoffman and Marine Corps General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command

JONATHAN HOFFMAN: Hey, good afternoon everybody, thank you for joining us. Sorry to be hosting this a little bit later in the day, but we had some events going on earlier that we needed to attend to. As you're aware, Secretary Esper and Chairman Milley and Gen. McKenzie participated in a classified all-member briefing with the House and Senate this afternoon to discuss the successful U.S. military operation that resulted in the death of Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder and leader of ISIS.

CENTCOM commander, Gen. McKenzie, is here with me today to share more details about the operation, but, first, I'd like to add a few operational updates. Shortly after this briefing, and we'll actually have to wrap this up when we butt up against the time for, the White House will be hosting a Medal of Honor ceremony for Army Master Sgt. Matthew Williams. Master Sgt. Williams is receiving this award for risking his life to save fellow special operators in Shok Valley, Afghanistan, during Operation Commando Wrath in 2008. Master Sgt. Williams' leadership and bravery represent all that the Medal of Honor symbolizes, and we are honored for him to be presented with the nation's highest medal for valor. We're eternally grateful to men like Master Sgt. Williams that they choose to protect and defend this country. This event will be live streamed. We hope you all will tune in.

Lastly, the department continues to operate under a continuing resolution, which we expect to expire in three weeks. The secretary and the department have been consistent in our messaging that this is unacceptable, and we ask members of Congress to consider working with us over the coming weeks to find a solution to fully fund our operators every day where we do not have a -- a final budget. It affects our readiness. It affects our lethality, and it affects our maintenance efforts. So we look forward to working with Congress on that.

With that, I'll quickly turn it over to Gen. McKenzie to make a few opening remarks, and then we'll be happy to take your questions.

GEN. KENNETH F. MCKENZIE: Thanks, Jon. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for joining us here today. As the commander of U.S. Central Command, I was the operational commander for the mission against Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, so I'm here to provide additional details on the mission that resulted in his death. I have some prepared remarks, and then I'll take a few questions on the raid at the end. Let's get the first slide, please. As a symbolic founder and self-proclaimed leader of a murderous gang of terrorists that once controlled a large swathe of territory in Iraq and Syria, and which committed an untold number of atrocities there and abroad, Baghdadi was a priority target of U.S. Central Command. Baghdadi was the subject of an intense interagency effort to bring him to justice, and that effort significantly advanced recently as we closed in on his whereabouts.

As it became clear that we had gained fleeting and actionable intelligence on his hideout, we developed an executional level plan designed to capture or kill him and started preparing a special operations team for the mission. I initially briefed department leadership on the intelligence and the plan. Last Friday, October the 25th, with the approval of Secretary Esper and Chairman Milley, we then extensively briefed the president on all aspects of the plan and the risks involved in its execution. Next slide please.

The general outline of the mission was a helicopter assault by special operations forces that were pre-staged in Syria, launched against an isolated compound in northwest Syria where Baghdadi was suspected to be hiding. Following the assault, which was designed to capture or kill, the team returned to its staging base. While that concept sounds simple enough, I can assure you that the plan was significantly more complex than that, and designed to avoid detection by ISIS and others prior to and during execution, to avoid civilian casualties, and, with enough air cover, including armed helicopters, multiple unmanned strike aircraft, and fourth- and fifth-generation fighters, to support and defend the assaulting forces.

I will also note that the plan accounted for the assumption that we would find multiple children at the objective. As you will see, we took steps to minimize innocent casualties. With the approval of the president, and with prior contact to Russia and Turkey for the purpose of deconfliction, in order to reduce the risk to U.S. forces and prevent any state actors in Syria from miscalculating and interfering with our forces, I ordered the mission to commence from my headquarters in Tampa at around 9 o'clock a.m. Eastern time on Saturday the 26th. Throughout the day, I was in contact with the president and his national security team as they monitored from the White House. Let me have the next slide, please.

Here, we see the object of the assault, the compound where Baghdadi was hiding. As I noted earlier, this isolated compound was in Idlib Province in northwest Syria, approximately four miles from the Turkish border. It's an area that we have not traditionally operated in, and roughly a one hour helicopter flight from our staging base in Syria. We assessed that he was hiding in Idlib Province to avoid the intense pressure that had been put on ISIS and other places in Syria. Once the assault force arrived at the compound, fighters from two locations in the vicinity of the compound began firing on U.S. aircraft participating in the assault. These individuals, who we don't assess were affiliated with Baghdadi, but nonetheless demonstrated hostile intent against U.S. forces, were killed by two air strikes from supporting helicopters. Let's run the next video please.

These fighters opened fire on our aircraft, and what you see in the video is the actual response. With the assault force surrounding the compound, we repeatedly urged those inside to come out peacefully. Let's go to the next video, please.

This is a video of the assault force actually closing up to the compound. Those who came out of the building were checked for weapons and explosives and moved away from the immediate area. U.S. forces detained and later released the non-combatants. The group was treated humanely at all times, and included 11 children. I want to make it clear that despite the violent nature of the raid and the high-profile nature of this assault, every effort was made to avoid civilian casualties and to protect the children that we suspected would be at the compound.

Five ISIS members inside the compound presented a threat to the force. They did not respond to commands in Arabic to surrender, and they continued to threaten the force. They were then engaged by the raid force and killed. There were four women and one man. After this engagement, and once established inside the compound, U.S. forces discovered Baghdadi hiding in a tunnel. When capture at the hands of U.S. forces was imminent, Baghdadi detonated a bomb that he wore, killing himself and two young children that were with him.

The number two is a change. We originally thought there were three children with him, and this is the number we originally reported up the chain of command. We now know the number to be two, based on subsequent debriefing.

A total of six ISIS members died on the objective. Four were women, and there were two men, including Baghdadi. This is in addition to the two children killed by Baghdadi as he blew himself up. Let me emphasize again that 11 children were protected by the assault force, and two men on the objective were detained by the assault force, and they were extracted with the force.

After Baghdadi's murder/suicide, our assault force cleared significant debris from the tunnel and secured Baghdadi's remains for DNA identity confirmation, which were flown with the assault force back to the staging base.

Following collection of samples for formal DNA analysis, Baghdadi's remains were buried at sea in accordance with the law of armed conflict within 24 hours of his death. While the assault force was securing the remains, they also secured whatever documentation and electronics we could find, which was substantial. The assault force then left the compound and returned to their helicopters with the two detainees that I've already mentioned. After our forces were safely off the objective, U.S. forces employed precision standoff munitions to destroy the compound and its contents -- and its contents -- pardon me. Let's go to the next video, please.

So what you'll observe are U.S. standoff munitions striking the compound. For those of you who may have seen before and after pictures of the compound, it looks pretty much like a parking lot with large potholes right now. The operation was exquisitely planned and executed. It demonstrates the United States' global reach and our unwavering commitment to destroy ISIS, bring its leaders to justice, and to protect America and others from people like Baghdadi. The mission was a difficult, complex and precise raid that was executed with the highest level of professionalism and in the finest tradition of the U.S. military.

Since there is a significant interest in military working dogs, I wanted to provide a little background on this fine K-9. Next photo, please. And actually, let's go back a moment. Before I actually go to the dog, I would just like to show you the before and after pictures of the raid compound. You can see the way it looked before, and you can see the way it looks -- the way it looked afterwards. So, it's pretty clear the success of the standoff munitions that we employed to ensure that it would not be a shrine or otherwise memorable in any way. It's just another piece of ground. Let's go to the dog picture.

U.S. Special Operations Command military working dogs are critical members of our forces. These animals protect U.S. forces, save civilian lives, separate combatants from non-combatants, and immobilize individuals who express hostile intent. This dog is a four-year veteran of the SOCOM K-9 program and has been a member of approximately 50 combat missions. He was injured by exposed live electrical cables in the tunnel after Baghdadi detonated his vest beneath the compound. I will also note he has been returned to duty.

Finally, I would like to address the DNA analysis that was conducted to confirm Baghdadi's identity. The final slide, please? As you can see, the Defense Intelligence Agency conducted the analysis, and compared DNA from the remains taken from the compound with an on-file sample taken when

Baghdadi was at Camp Bucca prison in Iraq in 2004. The analysis showed a direct match between the samples and produced a level of certainty that the remains belonged to Baghdadi, of one in 104 septillion, which is certainly beyond a shadow of a doubt.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge that despite Baghdadi's death, we will not forget the victims of the atrocities he directed and inspired since 2014. U.S. Central Command remains focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS, and will remain vigilant against all terrorist organizations in the region who threaten the United States, our partners and our allies. I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the professionalism in the men and women who made this operation a success. This was a true interagency effort, so I commend our partners across the U.S. government. The individuals who planned and conducted the mission are quiet professionals, focused on their mission above glory or recognition. Committed people did hard, risky work, and they did it well. I now have a few minutes to answer questions. Jonathan, over to you.

MR. HOFFMAN: Lita.

Q: General McKenzie, with the death of Baghdadi, can you just give us a sense of what the U.S. counter-ISIS fight is going to look like? Are you seeing leaders start to emerge? And just as a related, the troops are now moving into Deir ez-Zor, can you tell us how they're going to supplement that counter-ISIS mission, and explain about how they're going to be protecting the oil?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure, absolutely. Let's -- let's start with -- with -- with ISIS. ISIS is first and last an ideology, so we're under no illusions that it's going to go away just because we -- we killed Baghdadi. It will remain. Suspect at the highest levels they'll be a little disrupted; it will take them some time to reestablish someone to lead the organization, and during that period of time their actions may be a little bit disjointed. They will be dangerous. We suspect they will try some form of retribution attack, and we are postured and prepared to -- and we're postured and prepared for that.

But -- but we should recognize that, again, since it's an ideology, you're never going to be able to completely stamp it out. And, in fact, our definition of long term success against ISIS and other entities like ISIS is not the complete absence of that ideology, but rather its existence at a level where local security forces, wherever in the world it exists, can deal with it. There's no international connective tissue. There's no ability to attack our homeland, and local forces, perhaps with training and some assistance, perhaps without those things, is going to be able to suppress those entities as they go forward.

We don't see a bloodless future, because, unfortunately, this ideology is going to be out there, but we think there's a way to get to a point where it's going to be less -- less and less effective over time.

So the second part off your question was about Deir ez-Zor. What we want to do is ensure that ISIS is not able to regain possession of any of the oil fields that would allow them to gain income going forward. So that's -- we've got forces at Deir ez-Zor, that is -- we have brought in some reinforcements there. We'll await further decisions of the U.S. government about how that plan is going to look in the long term, and I wouldn't want to get ahead of the Secretary of Defense in describing that. But as of right now, we have secured the oil fields at Deir ez-Zor, generally east of the Euphrates River, in the vicinity of Conoco and Green Village, for those of you that follow the details on the ground.

MR. HOFFMAN: Phil?

Q: General, could you confirm that Baghdadi -- his final moments, there was -- the president said that he was whimpering and crying in his final moments. And also, could you give us any better of a sense -- you talked about substantial electronics recovered from the site. What did -- could you elaborate a bit on what that means?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure, so let me start with the second part. No, I can't tell you anything about what we took off the site. You'll appreciate that. We're going to exploit that, and we expect it to help us as we go forward. So, -- now about Baghdadi's last moments; I can tell you this: he crawled into a hole with two small children, and blew himself up while his -- while his people stayed on the ground; so you can deduce what kind of person it is based on that activity. So that would be just my empirical observation of what he did. I'm not able to confirm anything else about his last seconds. I just can't confirm that one way or another.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right. Luis?

Q: Sir, were there reinforcements? Did any other ISIS personnel try to approach that position? And -- and was there fire that was exchanged? There's footage of a white van that was riddled with bullets that was right next to the scene.

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So, there were no other ISIS forces in the area. We are completely confident of that. He had been up there for an extended period of time hiding. There were other militant groups in the area that probably did not know he was there. Once they saw the helicopters land and begin to operate, they began to flow toward it. So -- but they were not flowing to reinforce him, they were flowing toward what they saw -- thought was -- was perhaps a Turk military operation, perhaps a Russian military operation, perhaps an American military operation. They

didn't know. So the white van that you talk about was one of the vehicles that displayed hostile intent, came toward us, and it was destroyed in addition to the video that I just shared for you -- with you of the fighters on the ground that were addressed by the gunships.

Q: Do you know how many casualties there may have been?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So you know, we don't. Out there it's going to be hard to know. We use the figure of about 10 to 15, but I -- but we really don't know for sure, and I don't know that we're ever going to know that, because we're not going to go back out there and count.

MR. HOFFMAN: Jennifer?

Q: Sir, you mentioned that you staged from within Syria. Was there anything about the changes on the ground in the last two to three weeks with the U.S. pulling back forces, with Turkey coming across, that caused you to accelerate this operation or change the timing of this operation?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So, Jennifer, absolutely not. We -- we -- we chose the time based on a variety of factors -- weather, certainty, lunar data, a variety of things like that. And while it might have been convenient to use bases there, the United States military has the capability to go almost anywhere and support ourselves even at great distances. So that was not a limiting factor. We -- we struck because the time was about right to do it then, given the totality of the intelligence and the other situation, and the other factors that would affect the raid force going in and coming out.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right. Missy?

Q: Just a general -- couple quick clarifications. So you said that there were, I think, six individuals killed on site, four women and two men, is that right?

GEN. MCKENZIE: That's correct.

Q: Did any of those individuals fire at the American forces as they were entering the compound? And also, could -- is there any other information you could give us about how the tunnel was detected, how far underground Baghdadi was, and do you know the rough ages of the children that he took down there with him?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So I would tell you we believe that the ages of both children that he took down there with him were under 12 years old. But that's about all I can tell you about that. I can tell you that -- that -- that we believe Baghdadi actually may have fired from his hole in his last moments. The other people that were -- that were engaged on the objective were behaving in a threatening manner with suicide vests approaching the raid force, and that causes you to make some decisions, particularly when they don't respond to Arabic language commands to stop, warning shots, and the progression of escalation that -- you know, that our special operators are so very good at, Missy.

Q: And how was the tunnel detected? Was it open or was it --

GEN. MCKENZIE: So we -- so as we looked at it -- and -- and, you know, as you would expect, we had an opportunity to study this pretty carefully. We came to the conclusion we should expect possibly a tunnel feature there. So that was the first thing that we -- that we took a look at. And -- and then the interrogation of people on the objective allowed us to gain a better appreciation of where it might be. And then, as you know, we just have a variety of things that I can't go into, one of them being the working dogs, that are very good at scenting humans and going after them when they're not immediately obvious. So, that's sort of how we came to that conclusion.

The key thing is, you know, we actually established physical security around the compound, got the non-combatants off, and that gave us a little bit of time to work the problem. You're -- pardon me. You're always worried in a situation like that that the house might be rigged, so you've got to pay attention to that. There are a variety of things that the raid force commander has to balance on the ground, and I think they did a remarkable job of doing that.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right, so I've just been given notice that the event in the White House is going to start shortly, so we're going to do a couple more questions and out of respect for Master Sgt. Williams, we're going to cut it short. So we'll go over here. Ryan?

Q: General, can you talk about any support that the SDF provided to this operation?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So, yes, I can. And so, as you know, we maintain, and continue to maintain, linkages to the SDF. Some of their early intelligence was very helpful to us in beginning to -- in beginning to shape this problem, so I would say that they were part of it. They did not participate in this raid. This was a U.S.-only operation. There were no other -- there were no other nationality that participated in it.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right. Helene?

Q: In the case of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, U.S. forces found that the house in Abbottabad had no internet, no cell service. You mentioned recovering electronic equipment from al-Baghdadi's place. Was -- was -- was he using the internet? Was there -- had they been -- had they been on lockdown or was he -- you know, was --

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. Good question. I think -- and we're still working this out. I think you'd find there's probably a messenger system that, you know, allowed you to put something on a -- on a floppy or on a -- on a bit of electronics and have someone physically move it somewhere. That seems to be the cutout that most of these organizations seem to prefer. But I defer -- I'm not going to go into much more detail on it than that.

MR. HOFFMAN: Tom, then, last question.

Q: General, you said two men were extracted with the special operations forces. Were they both ISIS members -- was one a supposed informant?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So both -- both members were extracted, both turned themselves over, both are under detention now, and I wouldn't go any further than that.

Q: What about the reward money, the \$25 million? Is -- who's going to get that?

GEN. MCKENZIE: I have no visibility on that. Sorry, Tom.

(CROSSTALK)

MR. HOFFMAN: That's -- that's going to go to the dog. All right, guys. Thank you very much. Sorry to have to cut it short, but I hope you guys understand we had a hard deadline. And, General McKenzie, thank you for coming in today to speak with everybody.

GEN. MCKENZIE: Thank you.

EXHIBIT B:

Nov. 20, 2019 email from a U.S. Defense Official noting “Surveillance footage will be reviewed to determine if an investigation needs to be opened”

Thursday, October 29, 2020 at 5:12:41 PM Israel Standard Time

Subject: RE: [Non-DoD Source] NPR query
Date: Wednesday, November 20, 2019 at 10:37:34 PM Israel Standard Time
From: Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA)
To: Daniel Estrin

Daniel,

On background as a Defense Official.

This is the first report we have received of possible civilian casualties. Initial reports are that the white van at the scene of the Baghdadi raid had fired on U.S. helicopters participating in the raid. Surveillance footage will be reviewed to determine if an investigation needs to be opened based upon this additional information.

Bill

CAPT Bill Urban
Dir. of Communication Integration
U.S. Central Command
Off: 813-529-0170
M: 813-966-8724
DSN 312-529-0170

From: Daniel Estrin <DEstrin@npr.org>
Sent: Wednesday, November 20, 2019 1:48 AM
To: Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <william.r.urban.mil@mail.mil>
Subject: Re: [Non-DoD Source] NPR query

Hi Capt Urban,

Thanks for the reply. I received the response below from CENTCOM that didn't address the specific allegation I am looking into, of civilian deaths and injuries. Is there someone I can speak with who can address the specifics, and if an investigation is being opened?

Thanks, Daniel

Coalition strikes against ISIS are carried out with meticulous, deliberate planning and include detailed intelligence from multiple sources. We take all allegations of civilian casualties seriously, and we consider new information when it becomes available to ensure a thorough and continuous review process.

Where possible and when appropriate, The U.S. Government delivers solatia (condolence) payments to families of civilians who we determine may have been inadvertently killed or injured by U.S. forces while we are engaged with enemy forces.

On Nov 20, 2019, at 3:19 AM, Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <william.r.urban.mil@mail.mil> wrote:

EXHIBIT C:

Feb. 20, 2020 email from Capt. Bill Urban noting that CENTCOM had initiated a credibility assessment.

Thursday, October 29, 2020 at 2:04:11 PM Israel Standard Time

Subject: RE: [Non-DoD Source] Re: Call today

Date: Thursday, February 20, 2020 at 10:48:01 PM Israel Standard Time

From: Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA)

To: Daniel Estrin

CC: Tom Bowman, Harrell, Zachary F CDR USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA), Riordan, Beth A MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CCCI (USA), Lawhorn, Michael T CIV CENTCOM CCCI (USA), Rigsbee, John J MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CENTCOM HQ (USA)

Daniel,

My apologies on the delay.

You can take this from me on the record by name, Capt. Bill Urban, spokesman for U.S. Central Command "U.S. Central Command has initiated a credibility assessment into an allegation of civilian casualties during the operation that resulted in the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Oct. 26-27, 2019, and that assessment is ongoing."

Bill

CAPT Bill Urban
Dir. of Communication Integration
U.S. Central Command
Off: 813-529-0170
M: 813-966-8724
DSN 312-529-0170

-----Original Message-----

From: Daniel Estrin <DEstrin@npr.org>
Sent: Thursday, February 20, 2020 10:43 AM
To: Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <william.r.urban.mil@mail.mil>
Cc: Tom Bowman <TBowman@npr.org>
Subject: Re: [Non-DoD Source] Re: Call today

Thanks Capt. Urban. Standing by.
Daniel

On 2/20/20, 1:01 AM, "Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA)" <william.r.urban.mil@mail.mil> wrote:

Daniel,

It does not look like I will be able to get you a statement tonight. Because of the briefing, I was unable to get the statement to the Commander before he left, and he has a significant professional/social engagement tonight. I do not think that I will hear back from him until tomorrow morning, but I expect I will be able to get you a statement tomorrow.

Thanks,
Bill

CAPT Bill Urban
Dir. of Communication Integration
U.S. Central Command
Off: 813-529-0170

EXHIBIT D:

July 13, 2020 email from Maj. Beth Riordan with statement by Capt. Bill Urban regarding the completion of the credibility assessment.

Thursday, October 29, 2020 at 6:19:47 PM Israel Standard Time

Subject: RE: [Non-DoD Source] Re: Call today

Date: Monday, July 13, 2020 at 4:55:53 PM Israel Daylight Time

From: Riordan, Beth A MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CCCI (USA)

To: DEstrin@npr.org, Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA)

CC: TBowman@npr.org, Lawhorn, Michael T CIV CENTCOM CCCI (USA), Rigsbee, John J MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CENTCOM HQ (USA)

Daniel,

You can attribute the following to Navy CAPT Bill Urban, U.S. Central Command Spokesperson:

“U.S. Central Command conducted a credibility assessment into an allegation of civilian casualties during the operation that resulted in the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Oct. 26-27, 2019. The findings indicate that U.S. forces employed appropriate, necessary, and proportionately scaled use of force in response to actions against U.S. forces, which turned lethal after warnings were not heeded.”

v/r,

Beth

Major Beth Riordan
U.S. Central Command Communication Integration (CCCI)
Media Operations
Office: 813-529-0213
Mobile: 813-300-6645

From: Daniel Estrin <DEstrin@npr.org>

Sent: Monday, July 13, 2020 6:46 AM

To: Riordan, Beth A MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <beth.a.riordan2.mil@mail.mil>; Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <william.r.urban.mil@mail.mil>

Cc: Tom Bowman <TBowman@npr.org>; Harrell, Zachary F CDR USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <zachary.f.harrell.mil@mail.mil>; Lawhorn, Michael T CIV CENTCOM CCCI (USA)

<michael.t.lawhorn.civ@mail.mil>; Rigsbee, John J MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CENTCOM HQ (USA)

<john.j.rigsbee.mil@mail.mil>

Subject: Re: [Non-DoD Source] Re: Call today

All active links contained in this email were disabled. Please verify the identity of the sender, and confirm the authenticity of all links contained within the message prior to copying and pasting the address to a Web browser.

Thanks Beth.

EXHIBIT E:

July 30, 2020 email from Maj. Beth Riordan with statement by Capt. Bill Urban citing the following evidence reviewed as part of the credibility assessment:

“We conducted a full and thorough review of all available evidence related to this allegation, to include open source information; assessments by our intelligence and fires professionals; and a legal review.”

Subject: RE: [Non-DoD Source] Re: Call today
Date: Thursday, July 30, 2020 at 10:54:15 PM Israel Daylight Time
From: Riordan, Beth A MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CCCI (USA)
To: DEstrin@npr.org, Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA)
CC: Lawhorn, Michael T CIV CENTCOM CCCI (USA), CENTCOM Macdill AFB CENTCOM HQ Mailbox CCCI Media Desk, Rigsbee, John J MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CENTCOM HQ (USA), LKapl@npr.org, TBowman@npr.org

Daniel,

You can attribute the following response to Capt. Bill Urban, spokesman for U.S. Central Command:

“U.S. forces are trained and experienced in the use of unmistakable warning and de-escalation measures. In this instance, U.S. forces clearly communicated that the van’s actions posed a threat by employing warning shots. We will not detail every measure in order to protect forces’ ability to de-escalate threats in future operations.

Despite these clear warnings, the personnel inside the vehicle continued to demonstrate hostile intent. The actions taken by members of the van by turning towards U.S. forces, accelerating, and ignoring warning shots were a clear demonstration of hostile intent. Based on this demonstration of hostile intent, U.S. forces exercised unit self-defense. Unit commanders always retain the inherent right and obligation to exercise unit self-defense in response to a hostile act or demonstrated hostile intent.

The demonstration of hostile intent by the members of the van, and the threat they continued to pose, did not stop just because their transportation was disabled. The continued actions after the vehicle was disabled reinforced the assessment that these personnel were a direct threat.

CENTCOM takes seriously any allegation of civilian casualties resulting from our operations. We conducted a full and thorough review of all available evidence related to this allegation, to include open source information; assessments by our intelligence and fires professionals; and a legal review. Solatia is not appropriate in cases like this, where someone demonstrates hostile intent or commits a hostile act against U.S. forces.

Finally, because the report and footage are classified, we are unable to provide a copy. You may submit a FOIA request for this information, but due to classification, you should expect significant redactions.”

Major Beth Riordan
U.S. Central Command Communication Integration (CCCI)
Media Operations
DSN; 312-529-0213
Comm: 813-529-0213
VSOIP: 302-529-7011
Mobile: 813-300-6645

From: Daniel Estrin <DEstrin@npr.org>
Sent: Tuesday, July 21, 2020 7:50 AM
To: Urban, William R (Bill) CAPT USN CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <william.r.urban.mil@mail.mil>; Riordan, Beth A MAJ USARMY CENTCOM CCCI (USA) <beth.a.riordan2.mil@mail.mil>

EXHIBIT F:

NPR report Oct. 27, 2020:

“Pentagon Says 2 Men Killed In Baghdadi
Raid Were Combatants But Offers Little
Evidence”

POURLY NEWS
Resume Listening
PLAYLIST

Men Say U.S. Helicopter Fire Killed Civilians During The Raid On Baghdadi



WAMU 88.5
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY RADIO

DONATE



WORLD

Pentagon Says 2 Men Killed In Baghdadi Raid Were Combatants But Offers Little Evidence

October 27, 2020 · 4:31 PM ET



DANIEL ESTRIN

[4-Minute Listen](#)

[PLAYLIST](#) [Download](#)



A woman walks past a wrecked van near the northwestern Syrian village of Barisha. Local residents and medical staff told NPR that noncombatant civilians who were in the van were injured and killed last year the night of the U.S. raid on the

compound of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The military says the men were combatants but found no weapons.

Ibrahim Yasouf/AFP via Getty Images

When President Trump announced the U.S. military raid that resulted in the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi one year ago on Oct. 27, officials praised the nighttime operation and said civilians were protected.

But in December, NPR reported claims that forces had killed two Syrian civilians and maimed a third during the raid, prompting the military to investigate.

Now U.S. Central Command says it has completed its investigation and cleared its troops of any wrongdoing, classifying the Syrian men they attacked as combatants.



WORLD

Syrians Say U.S. Helicopter Fire Killed Civilians During The Raid On Baghdadi

Relatives of the Syrian victims reject the military's assertion.

"It's an investigation of lies," said Majida Qurmo, the widow of one of the Syrian men killed.

The military's account of events, shared with NPR, offers no evidence the men were combatants or intended to threaten troops, raising the question of whether the U.S. is mischaracterizing innocent civilians as the enemy as it protects the official narrative of a celebrated operation against one of the military's most-wanted targets.

"I was just trying to escape death"

Late at night on Oct. 26, 2019, U.S. forces slipped into northwest Syria by helicopter, descending upon Baghdadi's secret compound in the village of Barisha, near Idlib. That night, cousins Khaled Mustafa Qurmo, 27, and Khaled Abdel Majid Qurmo, 30, were driving home a friend, Barakat Barakat, in their olive-green van.

"We had pumpkin seeds and bought coffee on the road and were having fun," Barakat, now 36, told NPR. "We were driving through the village of Barisha. And at that

moment, the helicopters arrived. Suddenly, we were hit. I didn't know what was going on. I was just trying to escape death."

Article continues after sponsor message



The men fled the van, but one of them collapsed with shrapnel in his legs. Barakat said he cradled his friend outside the van when helicopter fire hit them again, killing the cousins and tearing off Barakat's hand that had been holding up his friend's head.



Khaled Mustafa Qurmo (left) and Khaled Abdel Majid Qurmo died of shrapnel wounds to the chest, according to autopsy reports.

Tur Laha local council

A relative of the victims sent NPR a video filmed at night of the destroyed van, turned white after the explosion, and nearby, two pockmarked bodies and a severed hand. Autopsy reports by a Syrian doctor with an international medical group concluded the men died of shrapnel wounds to the chest. A former Pentagon official reviewed shrapnel photos provided by relatives and assessed they had come from Hydra-70 rockets, a type fired by U.S. military helicopters.

The victims' relatives told NPR the cousins had operated a van service and were not combatants. Barakat said there were no weapons in the van.

Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, who commanded the Baghdadi operation, told reporters a few days after the raid that "every effort was made to avoid civilian casualties." In his step-by-step recounting, McKenzie spoke about combatants whom U.S. forces

encountered, but he did not mention the van incident until a reporter asked him about the damaged van that had appeared in news images. McKenzie responded that it was "one of the vehicles that displayed hostile intent, came toward us and it was destroyed."

Credibility assessment

In November, a Pentagon official said that NPR's reporting was the first it had heard of possible civilian casualties and that it would review surveillance footage to determine if an investigation was warranted. In February, the military said it opened a formal investigation, called a credibility assessment, into the allegations.

WORLD

The U.S. Investigates Possible Civilian Deaths During Baghdadi Raid In Syria

In July, CENTCOM spokesman Capt. Bill Urban told NPR the military had completed its assessment and determined U.S. forces "employed appropriate, necessary and proportionately scaled use of force in response to actions against U.S. forces, which turned lethal after warnings were not heeded."

Urban gave NPR additional details on Saturday. As the van approached, a U.S. helicopter fired warning shots, he said. "A normal reaction to warning shots in the middle of the night from a helicopter would be to stop and turn around if you had no business being there," Urban said. "But they proceeded towards the helicopter and accelerated."

The helicopter fired on the van, and the men fled, running in the direction of the ISIS compound without raising their hands, so forces perceived them to "demonstrate hostile intent" and the helicopter fired at them, Urban said. The military investigation determined they were "enemy combatants," not civilians, he said, though they did not open fire and the military found no evidence they had weapons.

"What do you expect at night?"

Retired Maj. Gen. Dana Pittard, who helped lead the fight against ISIS in Iraq and left the Army before the Baghdadi raid, said the forces were justified in protecting themselves from an approaching van of Syrians with unknown intentions. But he said the Syrians' actions were understandable, too.

"I assume it was dark, and you see a shot out there," said Pittard, who co-authored the book *Hunting the Caliphate*. "What is your inclination? Just put your foot on the pedal and keep going. So you don't know the direction of the shot. ... I mean, what do you expect at night?"

The U.S. sets aside about \$3 million a year to pay the families of civilians killed or wounded in U.S. attacks abroad, but Urban said such a payment "is not appropriate in cases like this, where someone demonstrates hostile intent or commits a hostile act against U.S. forces."

Pittard said he thinks the Army should pay. "Could they not find it, you know, in their hearts to have some kind of restitution and then move on?" he asked.

"Hostile intent"

Experts have criticized the U.S. military in past wars for labeling ordinary civilian responses to warning shots as demonstrations of "hostile intent."

Hostile intent, which the military defines as the threat of imminent use of force, is "too vague and subjective" and "dangerously broad," said Bonnie Docherty, a lecturer at Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic.

A review by Thomas Gregory, a senior lecturer at New Zealand's University of Auckland, of hundreds of incident reports of Iraqi civilians targeted by U.S. forces found that the majority were innocent. "Soldiers had simply misinterpreted perfectly innocent or innocuous behavior as a demonstration of hostile intent," Gregory said.

Urban said the Syrian men would not have been deemed threatening if they had run away from the compound. Yet, according to Gregory, in other cases, soldiers have targeted civilians fleeing the area of an attack because they were perceived to be combatants escaping U.S. troops.

"If the U.S. military were serious about investigating this incident, they would reopen this case," said Azmat Khan, a *New York Times Magazine* contributing writer and author of a forthcoming book on U.S. airstrikes and civilian deaths. Unlike many other similar incidents, she said, "the U.S. military has a unique opportunity to understand what really happened, because NPR tracked down survivors and family members and interviewed them."

Urban said the military would consider reopening the case if new evidence warranted it.

"The whole world turned its back on me"

CENTCOM said its investigators did not speak with the Syrian family members or Barakat, the attack's sole survivor. He said he wished the military had contacted him for his side of the story.

He said there is a risk Syrian armed groups might retaliate against him, suspecting him of connections with ISIS or another armed group because he was targeted by U.S. forces.

What worries him most is how to provide for his five children. He cannot work. Part of his right arm is gone, he can only use two fingers on his left hand, and doctors tell him he needs surgery. He is ashamed to have to beg for bread.

"Sometimes I cry," Barakat said in a Facebook voice message. "I think of my kids in that I'm unable to do anything for them. I'm ashamed. I can't work. I'm crippled. The whole world turned its back on me."

He has lost hope anything good will come out of telling his story to a journalist.

"I know already what's going to be on the Internet, the comments of the American people. 'God forbid,' and so on. We know all that talk. We've memorized that routine," Barakat said.

He added, "God damn the hour Baghdadi came here."

EXHIBIT G:

Nov. 16, 2017

New York Times Magazine report

“The Uncounted”

THE UNCOUNTED

By AZMAT KHAN and ANAND GOPAL
NOV. 16, 2017

Photographs by Giles Price/Institute, for The New York Times

LATE on the evening of Sept. 20, 2015, Basim Razzo sat in the study of his home on the eastern side of Mosul, his face lit up by a computer screen. His wife, Mayada, was already upstairs in bed, but Basim could lose hours clicking through car reviews on YouTube: the BMW Alpina B7, the Audi Q7. Almost every night went like this. Basim had long harbored a taste for fast rides, but around ISIS-occupied Mosul, the auto showrooms sat dark, and the family car in his garage — a 1991 BMW — had barely been used in a year. There simply was nowhere to go.

The Razzos lived in the Woods, a bucolic neighborhood on the banks of the Tigris, where marble and stucco villas sprawled amid forests of eucalyptus, chinar and pine. Cafes and restaurants lined the riverbanks, but ever since the city fell to ISIS the previous year, Basim and Mayada had preferred to entertain at home. They would set up chairs poolside and put kebabs on the grill, and Mayada would serve pizza or Chinese fried rice, all in an effort to

maintain life as they'd always known it. Their son, Yahya, had abandoned his studies at Mosul University and fled for Erbil, and they had not seen him since; those who left when ISIS took over could re-enter the caliphate, but once there, they could not leave — an impasse that stranded people wherever they found themselves. Birthdays, weddings and graduations came and went, the celebrations stockpiled for that impossibly distant moment: liberation.

Next door to Basim's home stood the nearly identical home belonging to his brother, Mohannad, and his wife, Azza. They were almost certainly asleep at that hour, but Basim guessed that their 18-year-old son, Najib, was still up. A few months earlier, he was arrested by the ISIS religious police for wearing jeans and a T-shirt with English writing. They gave him 10 lashes and, as a further measure of humiliation, clipped his hair into a buzz cut. Now he spent most of his time indoors, usually on Facebook. "Someday it'll all be over," Najib had posted just a few days earlier. "Until that day, I'll hold on with all my strength."

Sometimes, after his parents locked up for the night, Najib would fish the key out of the cupboard and steal over to his uncle's house. Basim had the uncanny ability to make his nephew forget the darkness of their situation. He had a glass-half-full exuberance, grounded in the belief that every human life — every setback and success, every heartbreak and triumph — is written by the 40th day in the womb. Basim was not a particularly religious man, but that small article of faith underpinned what seemed to him an ineluctable truth, even in wartime Iraq: Everything happens for a reason. It was an assurance he offered everyone; Yahya had lost a year's worth of education, but in exile he had met, and proposed to, the love of his life. "You see?" Basim would tell Mayada. "You see? That's fate."

Basim had felt this way for as long as he could remember. A 56-year-old account manager at Huawei, the Chinese multinational telecommunications company, he studied engineering in the 1980s at Western Michigan University. He and Mayada lived in Portage, Mich., in a tiny one-bedroom apartment that Mayada also used as the headquarters for her work as an Avon representative; she started small, offering makeup and

skin cream to neighbors, but soon expanded sales to Kalamazoo and Comstock. Within a year, she'd saved up enough to buy Basim a \$700 Minolta camera. Basim came to rely on her ability to impose order on the strange and the mundane, to master effortlessly everything from Yahya's chemistry homework to the alien repartee of faculty picnics and Rotary clubs. It was fate. They had been married now for 33 years.

Around midnight, Basim heard a thump from the second floor. He peeked out of his office and saw a sliver of light under the door to the bedroom of his daughter, Tuqa. He called out for her to go to bed. At 21, Tuqa would often stay up late, and though Basim knew that he wasn't a good example himself and that the current conditions afforded little reason to be up early, he believed in the calming power of an early-to-bed, early-to-rise routine. He waited at the foot of the stairs, called out again, and the sliver went dark.

It was 1 a.m. when Basim finally shut down the computer and headed upstairs to bed. He settled in next to Mayada, who was fast asleep.

Some time later, he snapped awake. His shirt was drenched, and there was a strange taste — blood? — on his tongue. The air was thick and acrid. He looked up. He was in the bedroom, but the roof was nearly gone. He could see the night sky, the stars over Mosul. Basim reached out and found his legs pressed just inches from his face by what remained of his bed. He began to panic. He turned to his left, and there was a heap of rubble. "Mayada!" he screamed. "Mayada!" It was then that he noticed the silence. "Mayada!" he shouted. "Tuqa!" The bedroom walls were missing, leaving only the bare supports. He could see the dark outlines of treetops. He began to hear the faraway, unmistakable sound of a woman's voice. He cried out, and the voice shouted back, "Where are you?" It was Azza, his sister-in-law, somewhere outside.

"Mayada's gone!" he shouted.

"No, no, I'll find her!"

"No, no, no, she's gone," he cried back. "They're all gone!"

LATER THAT SAME day, the American-led coalition fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria uploaded a video to its YouTube channel. The clip, titled “Coalition Airstrike Destroys Daesh VBIED Facility Near Mosul, Iraq 20 Sept 2015,” shows spectral black-and-white night-vision footage of two sprawling compounds, filmed by an aircraft slowly rotating above. There is no sound. Within seconds, the structures disappear in bursts of black smoke. The target, according to the caption, was a car-bomb factory, a hub in a network of “multiple facilities spread across Mosul used to produce VBIEDs for ISIL’s terrorist activities,” posing “a direct threat to both civilians and Iraqi security forces.” Later, when he found the video, Basim could watch only the first few frames. He knew immediately that the buildings were his and his brother’s houses.

The clip is one of hundreds the coalition has released since the American-led war against the Islamic State began in August 2014. Also posted to Defense Department websites, they are presented as evidence of a military campaign unlike any other — precise, transparent and unyielding. In the effort to expel ISIS from Iraq and Syria, the coalition has conducted more than 27,500 strikes to date, deploying everything from Vietnam-era B-52 bombers to modern Predator drones. That overwhelming air power has made it possible for local ground troops to overcome heavy resistance and retake cities throughout the region. “U.S. and coalition forces work very hard to be precise in airstrikes,” Maj. Shane Huff, a spokesman for the Central Command, told us, and as a result “are conducting one of the most precise air campaigns in military history.”

American military planners go to great lengths to distinguish today’s precision strikes from the air raids of earlier wars, which were carried out with little or no regard for civilian casualties. They describe a target-selection process grounded in meticulously gathered intelligence, technological wizardry, carefully designed bureaucratic hurdles and extraordinary restraint. Intelligence analysts pass along proposed targets to “targeteers,” who study 3-D computer models as they calibrate the angle of attack. A team of lawyers evaluates the plan, and — if all goes well — the

process concludes with a strike so precise that it can, in some cases, destroy a room full of enemy fighters and leave the rest of the house intact.

The coalition usually announces an airstrike within a few days of its completion. It also publishes a monthly report assessing allegations of civilian casualties. Those it deems credible are generally explained as unavoidable accidents — a civilian vehicle drives into the target area moments after a bomb is dropped, for example. The coalition reports that since August 2014, it has killed tens of thousands of ISIS fighters and, according to our tally of its monthly summaries, 466 civilians in Iraq.

Yet until we raised his case, Basim's family was not among those counted. Mayada, Tuqa, Mohannad and Najib were four of an unknown number of Iraqi civilians whose deaths the coalition has placed in the "ISIS" column. Estimates from Airwars and other nongovernmental organizations suggest that the civilian death toll is much higher, but the coalition disputes such figures, arguing that they are based not on specific intelligence but local news reports and testimony gathered from afar. When the coalition notes a mission irregularity or receives an allegation, it conducts its own inquiry and publishes a sentence-long analysis of its findings. But no one knows how many Iraqis have simply gone uncounted.

Our own reporting, conducted over 18 months, shows that the air war has been significantly less precise than the coalition claims. Between April 2016 and June 2017, we visited the sites of nearly 150 airstrikes across northern Iraq, not long after ISIS was evicted from them. We toured the wreckage; we interviewed hundreds of witnesses, survivors, family members, intelligence informants and local officials; we photographed bomb fragments, scoured local news sources, identified ISIS targets in the vicinity and mapped the destruction through satellite imagery. We also visited the American air base in Qatar where the coalition directs the air campaign. There, we were given access to the main operations floor and interviewed senior commanders, intelligence officials, legal advisers and civilian-casualty assessment experts. We provided their analysts with the coordinates and date ranges of every airstrike — 103 in all — in three ISIS-

controlled areas and examined their responses. The result is the first systematic, ground-based sample of airstrikes in Iraq since this latest military action began in 2014.

We found that one in five of the coalition strikes we identified resulted in civilian death, a rate more than 31 times that acknowledged by the coalition. It is at such a distance from official claims that, in terms of civilian deaths, this may be the least transparent war in recent American history. Our reporting, moreover, revealed a consistent failure by the coalition to investigate claims properly or to keep records that make it possible to investigate the claims at all. While some of the civilian deaths we documented were a result of proximity to a legitimate ISIS target, many others appear to be the result simply of flawed or outdated intelligence that conflated civilians with combatants. In this system, Iraqis are considered guilty until proved innocent. Those who survive the strikes, people like Basim Razzo, remain marked as possible ISIS sympathizers, with no discernible path to clear their names.

BASIM WOKE UP in a ward at Mosul General Hospital, heavy with bandages. He was disoriented, but he remembered being pried loose from the rubble, the neighbors' hands all over his body, the backhoe serving him down to the earth, the flashing lights of an ambulance waiting in the distance. The rescuers worked quickly. Everyone knew it had been an airstrike; the planes could return at any minute to finish the job.

In the hospital, Basim was hazily aware of nurses and orderlies, but it was not until morning that he saw a familiar face. Mayada's brother placed a hand on his shoulder. When Basim asked who in his home survived, he was told: nobody. The blast killed Mayada and Tuqa instantly. A second strike hit next door, and Mohannad and Najib were also dead. Only Azza, Najib's mother, was alive, because the explosion had flung her through a second-story window.

With his hip shattered, his pubic bone broken and his back and the sole of his left foot studded with shrapnel, Basim would need major surgery. But no hospital in Mosul, or anywhere in the caliphate, had the personnel or equipment to carry it out. The only hope was to apply for permission to temporarily leave ISIS territory, which required approval from the surprisingly complex ISIS bureaucracy. A friend put in the paperwork, but the ISIS representative denied the request. “Let him die,” he told Basim’s friend. “There were four martyrs. Let him be the fifth.”

Basim was moved to his parents’ home on the city’s southern side. For two days, close friends and family members streamed in, but he hardly registered their presence. On the third day, he found himself able to sit up, and he began flipping through the pictures on his phone. One of the last was taken the evening before the attack: Tuqa grinning in the kitchen, clutching a sparkler. For the first time, he began to sob. Then he gathered himself and opened Facebook. “In the middle of the night,” he wrote, “coalition airplanes targeted two houses occupied by innocent civilians. Is this technology? This barbarian attack cost me the lives of my wife, daughter, brother and nephew.”

Suddenly, it was as if the whole city knew, and messages poured in. Word filtered to local sheikhs, imams and businessmen. Basim’s own fate was discussed. Favors were called in, and a few weeks later, ISIS granted Basim permission to leave the caliphate. There was one condition: He must put up the deed to some of his family’s property, which would be seized if he did not return. Basim feared traveling to Baghdad; whoever targeted his home might still believe him to be part of ISIS. Turkey seemed like his only option, and the only way to get there was to cross the breadth of Islamic State lands, through Syria.

For Basim, the next few days passed in a haze. A hired driver lowered him into a GMC Suburban, its rear seats removed to accommodate the mattress on which he reclined. They drove through the Islamic State countryside, past shabby villages and streams strewn with trash. In the afternoon, they reached Mount Sinjar, where a year earlier, Yazidi women were carted off by ISIS and sold into slavery. “I’m sorry, I have to go fast now,” the driver

said, revving up the engine until they were tearing through at 100 m.p.h. Yazidi guerrillas were now taking refuge in the highlands and were known to take aim at the traffic down below.

The country opened up into miles and miles of featureless desert. Basim could not distinguish the small Syrian towns they passed but was aware of reaching Raqqa, the capital of the caliphate, and being lifted by a team of pedestrians and moved to a second vehicle. Soon a new driver was rushing Basim along darkened fields of wheat and cotton on narrow, bone-jarring roads. At times, the pain in his hip was unbearable. They stopped to spend the night, but he did not know where. At dawn, they set out again. After a while, the driver reached under his seat and produced a pack of cigarettes, forbidden in the caliphate. Basim was alarmed, but the driver began to laugh. "Don't worry," he said. "We're now in Free Syrian Army territory."

Before long, the traffic slowed, and they were weaving through streets crowded with refugees and homeless children and Syrian rebels. Basim was pushed across the border on a wheelchair. Waiting on the Turkish side, standing by an ambulance, was his son. Weeping, Yahya bent down to embrace his father. They had not seen each other in a year.

Basim spent the next two months in and out of a bed at the Special Orthopedic Hospital in Adana, Turkey. In the long hours between operations, when the painkillers afforded moments of lucidity, he tried to avoid ruminating on his loss. He refused to look at photos of his house, but occasionally at first, and then obsessively, he began replaying his and Mayada's actions in the days and weeks before the attack, searching for an explanation. Why was his family targeted? Some friends assumed that an ISIS convoy had been nearby, but the video showed nothing moving in the vicinity. What it did show was two direct hits. "O.K., this is my house, and this is Mohannad's house," he recalled. "One rocket here, and one rocket there. It was not a mistake."

Basim's shock and grief were turning to anger. He knew the Americans; he had lived among them. He had always felt he understood them. He

desperately wanted to understand why his family was taken from him. “I decided,” he said, “to get justice.”

BASIM BELONGS TO one of Mosul’s grand old families, among the dozens descended — the story goes — from 40 prophets who settled the baking hot banks of the Tigris, opposite the ancient Assyrian metropolis of Nineveh. Though the city they founded has since acquired a reputation for conservatism, Basim could remember a time of cosmopolitan flair. When he was growing up, domed Yazidi shrines and arched Syriac Orthodox churches stood nearly side by side with mosques and minarets; cafes in the evenings filled with hookah smoke and students steeped in Iraq’s burgeoning free-verse poetry movement. On Thursdays, visitors could find bars, clubs and raucous all-night parties or head to the Station Hotel, built in the central railway depot, where travelers liked to congregate for a drink (and where, to her eternal amusement, Agatha Christie once met the manager, a Syrian Christian named Satan). The wealthy tended to sympathize with the old monarchy or nationalist causes, but the working-class neighborhoods, particularly the Kurdish and Christian quarters, were bastions of Communist support. Islamic fundamentalism was nearly unheard-of, a bizarre doctrine of the fringe.

In the 1970s, as Saddam Hussein consolidated power, Mosul’s pluralism began to erode, but Basim would not be around long enough to witness its disappearance. He left for England in 1979 and soon made his way to the United States. Settling into Michigan life was easy. Basim bought a Mustang, figured out health insurance, barbecued, went to cocktail parties and dated a woman he met in England. This development alarmed his parents, who began to pester him to settle down and suggested that he marry his cousin Mayada. He resisted at first, but the allure of making a life with someone from back home proved too great. He married Mayada in 1982, in a small ceremony at his uncle’s home in Ann Arbor, Mich., in front of a dozen people.

As the oldest son, Basim felt increasingly concerned about his aging parents, so in 1988, he and Mayada made the difficult decision to move back home permanently. The city they returned to had undergone a

shocking transformation. The Iran-Iraq war was winding down, but at a cost of as many as half a million dead Iraqis. The political alternatives of Basim's youth were gone: Communism had long since been crushed, and Arab nationalism had lost its luster under Hussein's Baathist dictatorship.

Instead, people increasingly described their suffering in the language of faith. The culture was transforming before Basim's eyes; for the first time, Mayada wrapped herself in a head scarf. Not long after, small networks of religious fundamentalists began appearing in Mosul, preaching to communities devastated by war and United Nations sanctions.

Then, in 2003, the United States invaded. One night just a few months afterward, the Americans showed up at the Woods and took over a huge abandoned military barracks across the street from Basim's property. The next morning, they started cutting down trees. "They said, 'This is for our security,'" Basim recalled. "I said, 'Your security doesn't mean destruction of the forest.'" Walls of concrete and concertina wire started to appear amid the pine and chinar stands. The barracks became a Joint Coordination Center, or J.C.C., where American troops worked with local security forces. Basim came to know some of the Americans; once, before the center acquired internet access, he helped a soldier send email to his mother back home. Sometimes he would serve as an impromptu translator.

Across Iraq, the American invasion had plunged the country into chaos and spawned a nationalist resistance — and amid the social collapse, the zealots seized the pulpit. Al Qaeda in Iraq recruited from Mosul's shanty towns and outlying villages and from nearby provincial cities like Tal Afar. By 2007, sections of Mosul were in rebellion. By then, the Americans had expanded the mission of the J.C.C., adding a center where Iraqis could file compensation claims for the injury or death of a loved one at the hands of American forces.

When the Americans withdrew in 2011, Basim felt as if almost everyone he knew harbored grievances toward the occupation. That same year, on one of his customary rambles around the internet, Basim came upon a TEDx Talk called "A Radical Experiment in Empathy" by Sam Richards, a

sociology professor at Penn State. Richards was asking the audience to imagine that China had invaded the United States, plundered its coal and propped up a kleptocratic government. Then he asked the audience to put themselves in the shoes of “an ordinary Arab Muslim living in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq.” He paced across the stage, scenes from the Iraq conflict playing behind him. “Can you feel their anger, their fear, their rage at what has happened to their country?”

Basim was transfixed. He’d never seen an American talk this way. That night, he wrote an email. “Dear Dr. Richards, my name is Basim Razzo, and I am a citizen of Iraq,” he began. He described how Iraqis had celebrated the overthrow of Hussein but then lost hope as the war progressed. “Radical Islamists grew as a result of this war, and many ideas grew out of this war which we have never seen or heard before,” he said. “I thank you very much for your speech to enlighten the American public about this war.”

Richards invited Basim to begin speaking to his classes over Skype, and a friendship blossomed. Years later, Richards saw Basim’s Facebook post describing the attack and ran it through Google Translate. He and his wife spent hours messaging with Basim, trying to console him. In the end, Richards had signed off, “This American friend of yours, this American brother, sends you a virtual hug.”

Now, as Basim lay in bed in the Special Orthopedic Hospital in Adana, he found his thoughts returning to the old Joint Coordination Center next to his house in Mosul and the condolence payments they used to offer. He knew that he would never recover the full extent of his losses, but he needed to clear his name. And he wanted an accounting. He decided that as soon as he recuperated, he would seek compensation. It was the only way he could imagine that an Iraqi civilian might sit face to face with a representative of the United States military.

HE IDEA THAT civilian victims of American wars deserve compensation was, until recently, a radical notion floating on the edges of military doctrine.

T Under international humanitarian law, it is legal for states to kill civilians in war when they are not specifically targeted, so long as “indiscriminate attacks” are not used and the number of civilian deaths is not disproportionate to the military advantage gained. Compensating victims, the argument went, would hinder the state’s ability to wage war. Even the Foreign Claims Act, the one American law on the books that allows civilians to be compensated for injury or death at the hands of United States military personnel, exempts losses due to combat.

Over the years, however, war planners have come to see strategic value in payments as a good-will gesture. During the Korean War, American commanders sometimes offered token cash or other gifts to wronged civilians, in a nod to local custom. These payments were designed to be symbolic expressions of condolence, not an official admission of wrongdoing or compensation for loss. During the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, war planners began to focus more seriously on condolence payments, seeing them as a way to improve relations with locals and forestall revenge attacks. Soon, American forces were disbursing thousands of dollars yearly to civilians who suffered losses because of combat operations, for everything from property damage to the death of a family member.

Because the military still refused to consider the payments as compensation for loss, the system became capricious almost by design. Rebuilding a home could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, on top of several thousands’ worth of furniture and other possessions. Medical bills could amount to thousands of dollars, especially for prostheses and rehabilitation. Losing government documents, like ID cards, could mean years of navigating a lumbering bureaucracy. The American condolence system addressed none of this. Payouts varied from one unit to the next, making the whole process seem arbitrary, mystifying or downright cruel to recipients: Payouts in Afghanistan, for example, ranged from as little as \$124.13 in one civilian death to \$15,000 in another.

In 2003, an activist from Northern California named Marla Ruzicka showed up in Baghdad determined to overhaul the system. She founded Civic, now known as the Center for Civilians in Conflict, and collected evidence of civilians killed in American military operations. She discovered not only that there were many more than expected but also that the assistance efforts for survivors were remarkably haphazard and arbitrary. Civic championed the cause in Washington and found an ally in Senator Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont. In 2005, Ruzicka was killed by a suicide blast in Baghdad, but her efforts culminated in legislation that established a fund to provide Iraqi victims of American combat operations with nonmonetary assistance — medical care, home reconstruction — that served, in practice, as compensation.

When the Americans withdrew in 2011, however, all condolence programs went defunct, and they were not revived when the United States began the war against ISIS in 2014. The Marla Ruzicka Iraqi War Victims Fund itself — the only program specifically designed to aid war victims still in effect — has turned to other priorities and no longer provides assistance to civilian survivors of American combat operations. When we asked the State Department whether civilian victims of American airstrikes could turn to the Marla Fund for assistance, they were unable to provide an answer.

The two most recent military spending bills also authorized millions of dollars for condolence payments, but the Defense Department has failed to enact these provisions or even propose a plan for how it might disburse that money. In fact, in the course of our investigation, we learned that not a single person in Iraq or Syria has received a condolence payment for a civilian death since the war began in 2014. “There really isn’t a process,” a senior Central Command official told us. “It’s not that anyone is against it; it just hasn’t been done, so it’s almost an aspirational requirement.”

With Mosul and Raqqa now out of ISIS control, the coalition is “not going to spend a lot of time thinking about” condolence payments, said Col. John Thomas, a spokesman for Central Command. “We’re putting our efforts into community safety and returning refugees to some sort of home.” While assisting civilian victims is no longer a military priority, some authorities

appear to remain concerned about retaliation. About a year after the strike on Basim's house, his cousin Hussain Al-Rizzo, a systems-engineering professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, received a visit from an F.B.I. agent. The agent, he said, asked if the deaths of his relatives in an American airstrike made him in his "heart of hearts sympathize with the bad guys." Hussain, who has lived in the United States since 1987, was stunned by the question. He said no.

IN LATE DECEMBER 2015, after three operations, Basim moved to Baghdad to live with Yahya in a five-bedroom house next door to his nephew Abdullah, Mohannad's oldest son. Eight screws were drilled into his left hip, a titanium plate stabilized his right hip and a six-inch scar mapped a line across his abdomen. His pain was unremitting. He was out of work and had little more than the clothes he took when escaping Mosul. His computer, the photo albums, the wedding gifts Mayada had packed for Yahya — all of it was buried under rubble.

Basim channeled his frustrations into proving his case to the Americans. With a quiet compulsiveness, he scoured the web, studying Google Earth images. He asked a niece, still living inside Mosul, to take clandestine photographs of the site, including close-ups of bomb fragments. He inventoried his lost possessions. He contacted everyone he'd met who might have links to the American authorities: acquaintances from Michigan, his cousins in Arkansas, a relative who was an assistant professor at Yale University. His best hope was Sam Richards, the professor at Penn State: One of his former students was an adviser to Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, and she helped him get an appointment at the United States Embassy in Baghdad.

On a rainy Sunday in February 2016, Yahya drove Basim to the perimeter of the Green Zone in downtown Baghdad. He proceeded into the fortified compound by walker and then boarded a minibus for the embassy, carrying a nine-page document he had compiled. Because there was no established

mechanism for Iraqi victims to meet American officials, his appointment was at the American Citizen Services section. He pressed against the window and showed the consular officer his dossier. One page contained satellite imagery of the Razzo houses, and others contained before-and-after photos of the destruction. Between them were photos of each victim: Mayada sipping tea, Tuqa in the back yard, Najib in a black-and-white self-portrait and a head shot of Mohannad, an engineering professor, his academic credentials filling the rest of the page. The most important issue, Basim had written, was that his family was now “looked at as members of ISIS” by the Iraqi authorities. This threatened to be a problem, especially after the city’s liberation.

The consular officer, who spoke to us on the condition of anonymity, was moved. “I have people coming in every day that lie to me, that come with these sob stories,” the officer remembered telling him, “but I believe you.” When Basim emerged onto the street, the rain was beating down, and a passer-by held out an umbrella as he hobbled to a taxi.

Two months passed, and Basim heard nothing. He wrote to the officer and reattached the report, asking for an update, but he received no reply. He tried again the next month and was told that his case had been “forwarded.” Then more silence.

We first met Basim not long after, in the spring of 2016, in a quiet cafe in Baghdad’s Mansour district. Basim’s cousin’s wife, Zareena Grewal, the Yale professor, had written an Op-Ed in *The New York Times* about the attack. We had already been investigating the larger problem of civilian airstrikes for several months, so we contacted him to learn more about his story. Nearly half the country was still under ISIS control, and all along Mansour’s palm-shaded sidewalks were the resplendent bursts of militia flags and posters of angelic-looking young men who had fallen on the front. Around the city, residents were living under a pall of suspicion that they were Islamic State sympathizers, a target for rogue militias and vengeful security forces, and Basim was eager to move north to Erbil. This was another reason he was determined to meet the Americans — not only for

compensation but also for a letter attesting to their mistake, to certify that he did not belong to ISIS. “We’ll hear something soon,” Basim assured us.

But as the summer months came and went, still without word, Basim’s confidence began to waver. In September, nearly a year after the airstrike, he tried emailing the embassy again. This time he received a response: “The recipient’s mailbox is full and can’t accept messages now. Please try resending this message later, or contact the recipient directly.” (The consular officer later told us that when Basim’s case was referred to a military attorney, the attorney replied, “There’s no way to prove that the U.S. was involved.”)

In November, we wrote to the coalition ourselves, explaining that we were reporters working on an article about Basim. We provided details about his family and his efforts to reach someone in authority and included a link to the YouTube video the coalition posted immediately after the strike. A public-affairs officer responded, “There is nothing in the historical log for 20 SEP 2015,” the date the coalition had assigned to the strike video. Not long after, the video disappeared from the coalition’s YouTube channel. We responded by providing the GPS coordinates of Basim’s home, his emails to the State Department and an archived link to the YouTube video, which unlike the videos on the Pentagon’s website allow for comments underneath — including those that Basim’s family members left nearly a year before.

“I will NEVER forget my innocent and dear cousins who died in this pointless airstrike,” wrote Aisha Al-Rizzo, Tuqa’s 16-year-old cousin from Arkansas.

“You are murderers,” wrote Basim and Mohannad’s cousin Hassan al-Razzo. “You kill innocents with cold blood and then start creating justification.”

“How could you do that?” wrote another relative. “You don’t have a heart.”

Over the coming weeks, one by one, the coalition began removing all the airstrike videos from YouTube.

THE COALITION'S AIR war in Iraq is directed largely from the Combined Air Operations Center, quartered inside Al-Udeid Air Base in the desert outskirts of Doha, Qatar. As a shared hub for the Qatari Air Force, the British Royal Air Force and the United States Air Force and Central Command, among others, Udeid hosts some of the longest runways in the Middle East, as well as parking lots full of hulking KC-135 Stratotanker refueling planes, a huge swimming pool and a Pizza Hut. An alarm blares occasional high-temperature alerts, but the buildings themselves are kept so frigid that aviators sometimes wear extra socks as mittens.

When we visited in May, several uniformed officials walked us through the steps they took to avoid civilian casualties. The process seemed staggeringly complex — the wall-to-wall monitors, the soup of acronyms, the army of lawyers — but the impressively choreographed operation was designed to answer two basic questions about each proposed strike: Is the proposed target actually ISIS? And will attacking this ISIS target harm civilians in the vicinity?

As we sat around a long conference table, the officers explained how this works in the best-case scenario, when the coalition has weeks or months to consider a target. Intelligence streams in from partner forces, informants on the ground, electronic surveillance and drone footage. Once the coalition decides a target is ISIS, analysts study the probability that striking it will kill civilians in the vicinity, often by poring over drone footage of patterns of civilian activity. The greater the likelihood of civilian harm, the more mitigating measures the coalition takes. If the target is near an office building, the attack might be rescheduled for nighttime. If the area is crowded, the coalition might adjust its weaponry to limit the blast radius. Sometimes aircraft will even fire a warning shot, allowing people to escape targeted facilities before the strike. An official showed us grainy night-vision footage of this technique in action: Warning shots hit the ground near a shed in Deir al-Zour, Syria, prompting a pair of white silhouettes to flee, one tripping and picking himself back up, as the cross hairs follow.

Once the targeting team establishes the risks, a commander must approve the strike, taking care to ensure that the potential civilian harm is not “excessive relative to the expected military advantage gained,” as Lt. Col. Matthew King, the center’s deputy legal adviser, explained.

After the bombs drop, the pilots and other officials evaluate the strike. Sometimes a civilian vehicle can suddenly appear in the video feed moments before impact. Or, through studying footage of the aftermath, they might detect signs of a civilian presence. Either way, such a report triggers an internal assessment in which the coalition determines, through a review of imagery and testimony from mission personnel, whether the civilian casualty report is credible. If so, the coalition makes refinements to avoid future civilian casualties, they told us, a process that might include reconsidering some bit of intelligence or identifying a flaw in the decision-making process.

Most of the civilian deaths acknowledged by the coalition emerge from this internal reporting process. Often, though, watchdogs or journalists bring allegations to the coalition, or officials learn about potential civilian deaths through social media. The coalition ultimately rejects a vast majority of such external reports. It will try to match the incident to a strike in its logs to determine whether it was indeed its aircraft that struck the location in question (the Iraqi Air Force also carries out strikes). If so, it then scours its drone footage, pilot videos, internal records and, when they believe it is warranted, social media and other open-source information for corroborating evidence. Each month, the coalition releases a report listing those allegations deemed credible, dismissing most of them on the grounds that coalition aircraft did not strike in the vicinity or that the reporter failed to provide sufficiently precise information about the time and place of the episode. (The coalition counts both aircraft and artillery attacks in its strike figures; we excluded artillery attacks.)

In the eyes of the coalition, its diligence on these matters points to a dispiriting truth about war: Supreme precision can reduce civilian casualties to a very small number, but that number will never reach zero.

They speak of every one of the acknowledged deaths as tragic but utterly unavoidable. “We’re not happy with it, and we’re never going to be happy with it,” said Thomas, the Central Command spokesman. “But we’re pretty confident we do the best we can to try to limit these things.”

Because so much of this process is hidden — through March, the coalition released only one internal investigation from Iraq, a strike that hit a civilian vehicle in the Hatra district southwest of Mosul — its thoroughness is difficult to evaluate independently. The pre-eminent organization that seeks to do so is Airwars, a nonprofit based in London that monitors news reports, accounts by nongovernmental organizations, social-media posts and the coalition’s own public statements. Airwars tries to triangulate these sources and grade each allegation from “fair” to “disputed.” As of October, it estimates that up to 3,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed in coalition airstrikes — six times as many as the coalition has stated in its public summaries. But Chris Woods, the organization’s director, told us that Airwars itself “may be significantly underreporting deaths in Iraq,” because the local reporting there is weaker than in other countries that Airwars monitors.

The coalition sees the same problem but draws the opposite conclusion. In a September opinion article in *Foreign Policy*, with the headline “Reports of Civilian Casualties in the War Against ISIS Are Vastly Inflated,” Lt. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, the coalition’s former top commander, wrote: “Our critics are unable to conduct the detailed assessments the coalition does. They arguably often rely on scant information phoned in or posted by questionable sources.”

Counting civilian deaths in war zones has always been a difficult and controversial endeavor. The Iraq Body Count project, which sought to record civilian deaths after the 2003 invasion using techniques similar to Airwars, was flooded with criticism for both undercounting and overcounting. The *Lancet*, a medical journal, published studies based on surveys of Iraqi households that detractors alleged were not statistically sound. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have conducted ground investigations, but usually for only a handful of strikes at a time.

Yet the coalition, the institution best placed to investigate civilian death claims, does not itself routinely dispatch investigators on the ground, citing access and security concerns, meaning there has not been such a rigorous ground investigation of this air war — or any American-led air campaign — since Human Rights Watch analyzed the civilian toll of the NATO bombing in Kosovo, a conflict that ended in 1999.

In our interview at the base, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian, commander of the United States Air Forces Central Command at Udeid, told us what was missing. “Ground truth, that’s what you’re asking for,” he said. “We see what we see from altitude and pull in from other reports. Your perspective is talking to people on the ground.” He paused, and then offered what he thought it would take to arrive at the truth: “It’s got to be a combination of both.”

I **NVESTIGATING CIVILIAN HARM** on the ground is difficult but not impossible. In the spring of 2016, we began our own effort, visiting Iraqi cities and towns recently liberated from ISIS control. Ultimately, we selected three areas in Nineveh Province, traveling to the location of every airstrike that took place during ISIS control in each — 103 sites in all. These areas encompassed the range of ISIS-controlled settlements in size and population makeup: downtown Shura, a small provincial town that was largely abandoned during periods of heavy fighting; downtown Qaiyara, a suburban municipality; and Aden, a densely packed city neighborhood in eastern Mosul. The sample would arguably provide a conservative estimate of the civilian toll: It did not include western Mosul, which may have suffered the highest number of civilian deaths in the entire war. Nor did it include any strikes conducted after December 2016, when a rule change allowed more ground commanders to call in strikes, possibly contributing to a sharp increase in the death toll.

The areas we visited had undergone intense attacks of all kinds over the previous two years: airstrikes, sniper fire, mortars, rockets, improvised explosive devices, demolitions by ISIS, demolitions by anti-ISIS vigilantes

and more. Our approach required mapping each area, identifying the sites that had been struck from the air and excluding those damaged by Iraqi forces in close-quarters ground combat.

Finally, we determined who or what had been hit. In addition to interviewing hundreds of witnesses, we dug through the debris for bomb fragments, tracked down videos of airstrikes in the area and studied before-and-after satellite imagery. We also obtained and analyzed more than 100 coordinate sets for suspected ISIS sites passed on by intelligence informants. We then mapped each neighborhood door to door, identifying houses where ISIS members were known to have lived and locating ISIS facilities that could be considered legitimate targets. We scoured the wreckage of each strike for materials suggesting an ISIS presence, like weapons, literature and decomposed remains of fighters. We verified every allegation with local administrators, security forces or health officials.

In Qaiyara's residential district, where small wheat-colored homes sit behind low concrete walls, one or two structures had been reduced to rubble on almost every block. We went to all of them. A significant part of our efforts involved determining which air force — Iraqi or coalition — carried out each strike. Either way, according to official accounts, the air war in Qaiyara was remarkably precise: The coalition has stated that it killed only one civilian in or near the town, while the Iraqi Air Force has not acknowledged any civilian deaths in the area.

It was soon clear that many more had died. We visited one house that stood partly intact but for the rear alcove, which had been pancaked. A woman stepped out from the front of the structure, three children orbiting her. She told us her name, Inas Hamadi. "My children died here," she said. "It happened so quickly." One of the surviving children, Wiham, 11, remembered waking up to the sound of aircraft and running under the stairs to hide with her six siblings and cousins. Then the house was struck, collapsing the staircase onto them. Riam, 8, and Daoud, 5, did not survive. "Daoud's body was full of shrapnel," Wiham said. "Riam had a hole beside her ear and a hole in her brain. She looked around and was dizzy."

The strike was witnessed by neighbors, who helped rescue the children. Everyone agreed that the target was most likely the hospital or a pair of homes on the next street, all of which had been commandeered by ISIS. We collected the names and photographs of the dead and checked satellite imagery to confirm the date range of the strike. The deaths were never reported, were never recorded in any public database and were not investigated by the coalition.

We continued in this fashion, door to door. What we found was sobering: During the two years that ISIS ruled downtown Qaiyara, an area of about one square mile, there were 40 airstrikes, 13 of which killed 43 civilians — 19 men, eight women and 16 children, ages 14 or younger. In the same period, according to the Iraqi federal police, ISIS executed 18 civilians in downtown Qaiyara.

In Shura and Aden, we found a similar discrepancy between the number of civilian deaths on the ground and the number reported by the coalition. Through dozens of interviews at each site in all three locations, along with our house-to-house mapping, we tried to determine the reasons behind each airstrike that killed civilians. Coalition officials say ISIS fighters embedded in the population, making it difficult to avoid hitting civilians nearby. This appeared to be the case for about one-third of the deadly strikes — for example, a September 2016 strike on an ISIS-occupied primary school in Shura that killed three civilians in the vicinity.

But in about half of the strikes that killed civilians, we could find no discernible ISIS target nearby. Many of these strikes appear to have been based on poor or outdated intelligence. For example, last fall we visited a bombed-out house on the edge of Qaiyara, near the rail yard. It belonged to the family of Salam al-Odeh; neighbors and relatives told us the family had been sleeping one night when they awoke to the shudder of an airstrike nearby. Sometimes strikes came in pairs, so Salam's wife, Harbia, scooped up their baby, Bara, and ran out the door. Salam scrambled to save his other children — his daughter, Rawa, and his sons, Musab and Hussein. But then a second strike hit. Salam, the baby and Hussein were killed instantly. His wife hung on until she reached the hospital, where she told

her relatives what happened, but then died from her injuries. A few weeks later, Musab died of his wounds too. Only Rawa, who was 2, survived. Several months later, we found the person who called in the strike, one of the coalition's main sources in Qaiyara, a local Iraqi official we are not identifying for his safety. He told us that while on a walk one day, he spotted an ISIS mortar under a clump of trees near the rail yard and transmitted the coordinates. (Neighbors also told us that ISIS had occupied and then abandoned a house in the area a year earlier, which a different informant may have told the coalition about.) By the time the information made its way to the coalition and it decided to act, the mortar had been moved.

Such intelligence failures suggest that not all civilian casualties are unavoidable tragedies; some deaths could be prevented if the coalition recognizes its past failures and changes its operating assumptions accordingly. But in the course of our investigation, we found that it seldom did either.

In June, for example, we visited an electrical substation occupying several blocks of the Aden neighborhood in eastern Mosul. On the evening of April 20, 2015, aircraft bombed the station, causing a tremendous explosion that engulfed the street. Muthana Ahmed Tuaama, a university student, told us his brother rushed into the blaze to rescue the wounded, when a second blast shook the facility. "I found my brother at the end of the street," he said. "I carried him." Body parts littered the alleyway. "You see those puddles of water," he said. "It was just like that, but full of blood." We determined that at least 18 civilians died in this one attack and that many more were grievously wounded. News of the strike was picked up by local bloggers, national Iraqi outlets and ISIS propaganda channels and was submitted as an allegation to the coalition by Airwars. Months later, the coalition announced the results of its investigation, stating that there was "insufficient evidence to find that civilians were harmed in this strike." Yet even a cursory internet search offers significant evidence that civilians were harmed: We found disturbingly graphic videos of the strike's aftermath on

YouTube, showing blood-soaked toddlers and children with their legs ripped off.

A key part of the coalition's investigation process is to match civilian casualty accusations against its own logs. Chris Umphres, an Air Force captain at Udeid who assesses allegations of civilian casualties, told us that military investigators possess the coordinates of "every single strike conducted by coalition forces," crucial information unavailable to the typical journalist. "We have 100 percent accountability of where all of our weapons are employed."

We found this to not always be the case. For every location we visited, we submitted GPS coordinates to determine whether it was the coalition or the Iraqi Air Force that bombed the site. At first, the coalition told us it did not have the time or the staff to check more than a handful of the coordinates. But eventually, a team of Air Force analysts at Udeid agreed to compare the dates and coordinates of each of the 103 sites in our sample with those the coalition had recorded in its airstrike log. If a strike in our sample occurred within 50 meters of a strike that was recorded in the logs, they classified it as a "probable coalition airstrike," while assessing those outside this range — that is, anything more than a couple of house-lengths away — as "unlikely."

By this measure, 30 of the 103 strike sites in the sample we submitted are probable coalition strikes. But other evidence suggests that the coalition was responsible for many more. Human rights organizations have repeatedly found discrepancies between the dates or locations of strikes and those recorded in the logs. In one instance, the coalition deemed an allegation regarding a strike in the Al-Thani neighborhood of Tabqa, Syria, on Dec. 20, 2016, as "not credible," explaining that the nearest airstrike was more than a kilometer away. After Human Rights Watch dispatched researchers to the ground and discovered evidence to the contrary, the coalition acknowledged the strike as its own.

We found many such discrepancies. For instance, the Air Force analysts said it was unlikely that the coalition had struck Qaiyara's water-sanitation

facility because the logs recorded the nearest strike as 600 meters away, which would place it outside the compound entirely. Yet we discovered a video — uploaded by the coalition itself — showing a direct strike on that very facility. (When we asked Lt. Col. Damien Pickart, director of public affairs at Udeid, about this discrepancy, he said he could only report “what the strike log shows.”) Similarly, we were told that a strike we identified on Qaiyara’s main bridge was unlikely to be by the coalition, because the nearest strike was on a truck 150 meters away. We again found a coalition video showing a direct hit on the structure. Pickart explained the inconsistency by saying the coalition had conducted multiple strikes on various targets within an hourlong period, only one of which was included in the official log.

The most common justification the coalition gives when denying civilian casualty allegations is that it has no record of carrying out a strike at the time or area in question. If incomplete accounts like these are standard practice, it calls into question the coalition’s ability to determine whether any strike is its own. Still, even using the most conservative rubric and selecting only those 30 airstrikes the Air Force analysts classified as “probable” coalition airstrikes, we found at least 21 civilians had been killed in six strikes. Expanding to the 65 strikes that fell within 600 meters — for example, the strikes on the home of Inas Hamadi in Qaiyara and the electrical substation in Aden — pushed that figure to at least 54 killed in 15 strikes. No matter which threshold we used, though, the results from our sample were consistent: One of every five airstrikes killed a civilian.

To understand how radically different our assessment is from the coalition’s own, consider this: According to the coalition’s available data, 89 of its more than 14,000 airstrikes in Iraq have resulted in civilian deaths, or about one of every 157 strikes. The rate we found on the ground — one out of every five — is 31 times as high.

LAST DECEMBER, 15 months after the attack, following a long, tangled chain of emails and phone calls, the coalition confirmed that it had indeed carried out an airstrike on Basim and Mohannad’s homes. It acknowledged that it had, in fact, conducted an internal inquiry — a “credibility assessment” — the previous autumn after Zareena Grewal, Basim’s relative at Yale, wrote the Op-Ed in *The Times*. The assessment, completed on Oct. 30, 2015, concluded that the allegation was “credible”; this meant the coalition had known for more than a year that it had “more likely than not” killed civilians and that it had recommended a full investigation into the strike, even as Basim’s attempts to reach the coalition were being ignored. Despite this finding, the coalition neglected to include the incident in its public tally of deaths — which, in Iraq at that time, stood at 76 civilians — because of what Col. Joseph Scrocca, a coalition spokesman, called “an administrative oversight.”

Basim’s case had now become impossible to ignore. Based on the evidence we provided, Maj. Gen. Scott Kindsvater, then an Air Force deputy commander, ordered an internal investigation to determine what might have gone wrong on the night of the strike. And then, on Feb. 14, for the first time in the 17 months since the attack, Basim received an email from the coalition. “We deeply regret this unintentional loss of life in an attempt to defeat Da’esh,” Scrocca wrote, using another term for ISIS. “We are prepared to offer you a monetary expression of our sympathy and regret for this unfortunate incident.” He invited Basim to come to Erbil to discuss the matter. Basim was the first person to receive such an offer, in Iraq or Syria, during the entire anti-ISIS war.

Early in the morning of his scheduled meeting, Basim dreamed about Mayada. He could feel her skin next to his. He suddenly felt a surge of regret for things said and left unsaid, accrued over a lifetime together. He awoke in tears. “I washed my face,” he said, “did my morning prayer and sent her my prayers. It made me calmer.”

It was March 17. The air outside was soft and cool; Erbil had finally experienced rainfall after a parched winter. The coalition had asked Basim to go to Erbil International Airport, where he would be picked up and taken

to meet coalition representatives and receive a condolence payment. He invited us to join him, and we agreed. Basim did not know how much money the Americans would offer, but he had spent hours calculating the actual damages: \$500,000 for his and Mohannad's homes, furnishings and belongings; \$22,000 for two cars; and \$13,000 in medical bills from Turkey. We stood waiting in the parking lot. A white S.U.V. with tinted windows rolled by. A family emerged from a taxi, the father juggling two suitcases and a toddler, heading off on what appeared to be a vacation.

Basim checked his phone to see the latest messages from friends in Mosul. It had been a month since Iraqi forces seized the eastern half of the city, but the Woods were still too dangerous to visit because ISIS controlled the opposite bank and was lobbing mortars across the river. On the west side, thousands were trapped in the Old City, and Basim heard stories that ISIS was welding doors shut to keep people in their homes, holding them hostage against heavy artillery and air power. That morning, an airstrike flattened almost an entire city block in the Mosul Jidideh neighborhood — killing 105 civilians, according to the coalition, or possibly double that number, according to Airwars, in either case making it one of the largest aerial massacres since the war began.

It was late afternoon, 30 minutes past the meeting time, when an S.U.V. rolled up, an American in Army fatigues behind the wheel. We climbed in, and the truck moved off through the sprawling airfield, past rows of parked helicopters, toward a set of hangars. Basim struggled to maintain his composure. He'd imagined this day a hundred times, but now he wasn't sure what to say, how to act. The driver made small talk about the weather, the winter drought, the needs of farmers. He pulled the truck around to a prefab trailer ringed by blast walls. Inside, sitting around a large wooden table, were more American soldiers. Capt. Jaclyn Feeney, an Army attorney, introduced herself and invited Basim to be seated.

“We just wanted to start by expressing our deepest sympathies, not only on behalf of the Army but on behalf of myself,” she said. “We do take the closest care in what we do here, but it's high risk, and sometimes we make mistakes. We try our best to prevent those mistakes, but we hope that since

we did make a mistake here, we can do everything that we can to right it, as best we can. I know there's nothing that I can say that can make up for the loss that you've — ”

“The only thing that cannot be returned is the loss of life,” Basim said. His hands gripped the armrests, as if he were using every ounce of energy to stay seated. He struggled to keep his voice steady. “Everything else could be redone or rebuilt. The loss of life is unrepairable.”

“Certainly. We are prepared to offer you a condolence payment,” Feeney replied. “It's not meant to recompensate you for what you've lost, or for rebuilding or anything like that. It's just meant to be an expression of our sympathy, our apologies for your loss.”

Outside, a plane lifted off, and the room trembled. Feeney was holding documents in her hand. “And so for that reason, we are capped in the amount that we can give you. So the amount in U.S. dollars is \$15,000, which we will be paying you in Iraqi dinars, so 17,550,000 dinars. And so, if you're willing to accept that — ”

Basim looked at her in disbelief. “No.”

“You're not willing to accept that?”

“This is — this is an insult to me. No, I will not accept it. I'm sorry.”

Feeney looked stunned. “I'm sorry also,” she said.

Moments passed, and everyone sat in silence. Feeney explained again that they were capped by their own regulations. Basim replied, “This is, I have to say, I'm sorry to say, ridiculous.” Basim said he wanted official documentation proving his innocence, so that he could return safely to Mosul one day. Feeney promised to make some calls. The meeting quickly came to an end.

Basim walked out into the late-afternoon air. Traffic at the airport had picked up: buses overloaded with families, children sticking their elbows out of taxis. Basim drove home in disbelief, as if he were living through an

elaborate hoax and the Americans would call back any minute with a serious offer. The truth was, he never expected to recover the full extent of his material losses, and he knew the military was not in the business of compensation, only condolence, but after so many months, so much back and forth, the humiliation burned. “This is what an Iraqi is worth,” he said.

At home, he considered his options. He wanted a lawyer — but from where? Could an Iraqi find an American attorney? The amount the coalition had offered exceeded its own guidelines, which stipulated \$2,500 per Iraqi, but did not cover Mohannad and Najib, which meant he — or his sister-in-law — would potentially have to endure this process again. He considered traveling to the United States to find an advocate, but getting a visa was almost impossible. Once, in the first months after the attack, he even wanted to move there, seek asylum. Now the thought seemed absurd.

Despite everything, Basim could not bring himself to hate Americans. In fact, this experience was further evidence for a theory he had harbored for a while: that he, fellow Iraqis and even ordinary Americans were all bit players in a drama bigger than any of them. A few weeks later, he spoke to Sociology 119, Sam Richards’s Race and Ethnic Relations class at Penn State. “I have nothing against the regular American citizen,” he told the class of some 750 students. “I lived among you guys for eight years. I was never bothered by any person — in fact, many of them were very helpful to me.”

“This situation of war,” he continued, “big corporations are behind it.” This is where the real power lay, not with individual Americans. He’d come to believe that his family, along with all Iraqis, had been caught in the grinder of grand forces like oil and empire, and that the only refuge lay in something even grander: faith. He had rediscovered his religion. “There was some bond that grew between me and my God. I thanked him for keeping my son alive. I thanked him that my operation was successful. Now I can walk.”

It was the same God who had written out his whole life from the 40th day in the womb. Basim's faith in this divinely authored fate had become a calming current, coursing through his every waking moment. "Sometimes I go out with my friends," Basim told the students. "But when I come back home, when I go to bed and thoughts start coming into my head about my wife, what would have happened probably five years from now, my daughter would be in college, she wanted to study this and that — there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about them. But in the end, life goes on."

T HIS SPRING, Iraqi forces pushed deeper into western Mosul, into the Old City, a hive of stacked houses that lean over narrow streets. The neighborhood was being pounded with airstrikes and mortars, while ISIS was refusing to allow people to leave. Basim learned that three in-laws of Abdullah, Mohannad's son — a pregnant woman, her husband and his father — had tried to bribe their way to the east side but were caught and beheaded. Nearly everyone was telling such stories. Meanwhile, word spread that Basim had taken his case to the coalition, and aggrieved families started to reach out for advice. Basim felt like an elder statesman of heartbreak, and he offered whatever counsel he could. The strike on his house remained a great mystery, though, and not a day passed when he did not retrace the hours and days before the attack, wondering what could have brought it on.

In April, through the Freedom of Information Act, we finally obtained a portion of the coalition's internal probe of the strike on the Razzo homes. As Basim read though a dozen partly redacted pages, a story began to emerge — the coalition had been receiving intelligence that his and Mohannad's houses were an ISIS command center. The report suggests that this may have been because of the J.C.C. next door; Basim recalled that ISIS briefly occupied the J.C.C. when it first conquered Mosul but had long since abandoned the facility. Yet the coalition's intelligence source apparently passed along this outdated information and in the process confused his house with the J.C.C.

Next, according to the report, the coalition dispatched a drone to surveil the property. Over three days, in 15-to-30-minute windows, his house was filmed. The investigation acknowledged that “no overtly nefarious activity was observed,” but nonetheless everything the coalition witnessed confirmed its conviction that it was filming a terrorist headquarters. No weapons were visible, but the report noted that ISIS “does not obviously brandish weapons,” so as to go undetected. Occasionally Basim or Mohannad would open their shared gate to the street, allowing a guest to enter. The coalition simply saw men opening a gate, an action that it determined was consistent with the activity of an ISIS headquarters. And, perhaps most important, the report stated that the coalition did not observe any women or children outdoors — although in the ISIS-controlled city, women rarely left the house to avoid the religious police, and most filming had occurred under the blistering afternoon sun, when almost everyone stayed indoors.

Though the Razzos hadn’t known it, the burden of proof had been on them to demonstrate to a drone watching them from above that they were civilians — guilty until proved innocent. In the end, 95 minutes of unremarkable footage had sealed the fate of Mayada, Tuqa, Mohannad and Najib. The report concluded that there was “no evidence indicating carelessness or bad faith” on the part of the coalition and that its targeting process “remains sound.” (It also declared that because of an equipment error, the drone footage no longer existed for investigators to review.) Yet to Basim, the truth seemed just the opposite: The coalition had disregarded ground realities and acted on flimsy intelligence.

Not long after receiving the report, Basim decided to return to the Woods. It was risky to visit — ISIS was still controlling neighborhoods on the opposite bank — but he wanted to see, to touch, what was left, and he took us along. We set out in the early morning, driving past dusty abandoned villages, through checkpoints sporting brilliant hoists of red, blue and green militia flags and onto a broad boulevard, teeming with pushcart vendors and street children. Whole city blocks were flattened. Basim was not caught off guard by the destruction, which he expected based on the videos he’d

seen, but he was surprised by the traffic. He regarded the passing scenes as if he were a tour guide, recounting the history of each neighborhood. It appeared to be an affectation of calm, a studied attempt to withstand the torment of return, but the truth eventually surfaced. "I'm numb," he said. "I'm just numb."

We drove past more ruined buildings. Around the wreckage of one stood a concrete wall, still intact, where ISIS had painted two hands open in supplication. Basim translated the inscription: THANK GOD FOR EVERYTHING YOU HAVE. IF YOU DO, HE WILL GIVE YOU MORE.

We headed toward the Tigris River. As we approached, we could see the apartments, houses and minarets on the other side, still under ISIS control. And then suddenly, the city was gone. We entered the Woods, which remained a bucolic oasis. The trees were heavy with figs, apricots and lemons, and the air buzzed with mosquitoes. We pulled up to a pale yellow gate. Basim lingered outside for a moment, afraid to approach. He then opened it and stepped onto his property for the first time in 18 months. We followed him along an overgrown stone path. He stopped in front of a smashed-up wall surrounded by chunks of concrete. Rebar snaked out like hairs. "This was the laundry room," he said.

To the right stood what was once his kitchen. A faint rotten odor emerged from within. The remnants of a table and three chairs were visible. Scattered amid the shattered glass and charred metal bars were pages of recipes: Cookies & Cream Freeze, Chocolate Mousse Torte.

We moved over the rest of the debris. Marble shards, concrete blocks, several mattresses, two satellite dishes, a Spalding tennis racket, an iron, a book of equations, a bathroom sink. The backyard was intact. "At least we still have a swimming pool!" Basim said, laughing absently.

He circled back to the laundry room. There he spotted in a corner, poking out of the rubble, a white platform heel. It belonged to Tuqa. "I told her they were too high and that she would fall," he said. He could picture her wearing them, coming down the stairs.

Azmat Khan is an investigative journalist and a Future of War fellow at New America and Arizona State University. For an investigation into the civilian death toll of the U.S.-led war against ISIS, she teamed up with Anand Gopal, an assistant research professor at Arizona State and the author of “No Good Men Among the Living.”

Digital design by Rodrigo de Benito Sanz

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EXHIBIT H:

Wikipedia entry

“Death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”

with subheading “Possible civilian casualties” on pg. 9 of document

Death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Operation Kayla Mueller






Part of the international military intervention against ISIL, the American-led intervention in the Syrian Civil War (Operation Inherent Resolve), the Syrian Civil War, and the Global War on Terrorism



Baghdadi's compound, before and after the U.S. special operations raid, October 26–27, 2019

Date	October 26–27, 2019
Location	300 meters outside <u>Barisha</u> , ^[5] <u>Harem District</u> , <u>Idlib Governorate</u> , <u>Syria</u> 36.1658°N 36.6274°E
Result	Operation successful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Death of <u>Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi</u> ▪ Seizure of materials and captives from compound; compound later destroyed by U.S. <u>fighter jets</u> and <u>drones</u>


Belligerents

 United States	 Islamic State
Supported by:	 <u>Guardians of Religion Organization</u>
 <u>Iraq</u> ^[1]	
 <u>Turkey</u> ^[2] ^[3]	
 <u>Syrian Democratic Forces</u> ^[4]	

Commanders and leaders

 Donald Trump	 Abu Bakr al-
 Mark Esper	Baghdadi †
 Kenneth F. McKenzie	 Abu Muhammad al-
Jr.	Halabi † ^{[6][7]}
 Mark A. Milley	

Units involved

 Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)	Unknown
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>A squadron, 1st SFOD-D (Delta Force)</u> ▪ <u>75th Ranger Regiment</u> ▪ <u>160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne)</u> 	

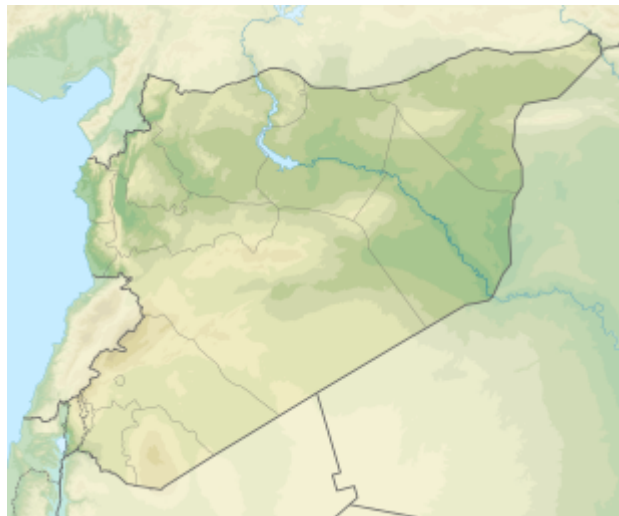
Strength

~100 JSOC operators ^[8] 8 helicopters Unknown number of <u>military working dogs and robots</u>	Unknown
--	---------

Casualties and losses

2 soldiers and 1 military working dog injured ^[9]	16–21 killed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 6 ISIL members including Baghdad^[10] ▪ 10–15 non-ISIL militants^[10] 2 militants captured ^[11]
2 children died after Baghdad ^{[12][13]} detonated his vest	
2 civilians reportedly killed and one injured by U.S. airstrikes ^[14]	

 Barisha



Location of Barisha in Syria

On October 26–27, 2019, the United States conducted **Operation Kayla Mueller**, a military operation named after Kayla Mueller,^[15] that resulted in the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the then-leader and self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization. The operation took place in the outskirts of Barisha, Idlib Governorate, Syria. According to General Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) commander who oversaw the operation, Baghdadi killed himself along with two children when he detonated a suicide belt while seeking to evade the U.S. forces during the raid.^[10]

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Background

The raid was launched based on an intelligence effort to locate the leader of ISIL by the CIA's Special Activities Center.^[16] *The New York Times* reported that, according to two U.S. officials, the CIA obtained the original intelligence on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi following the arrests of one of his wives and a courier, after which the CIA worked closely with Iraqi and Kurdish intelligence officials in Iraq and Syria.^[17] *The Guardian*, however, reported Iraqi officials as saying that the break came after a smuggler (who had smuggled the wives of two brothers of Baghdadi and Baghdadi's children in the past), a woman thought to be his wife, and Baghdadi's nephew provided information on the routes and destinations.^[7] Iraqi officials also stated that the arrest of Muhammad Ali Sajid al-Zobaie, Baghdadi's brother-in-law, helped them in finding a desert tunnel leading to two hideouts, filled with items, near Al-Qaim, Iraq, and thereby penetrate a smuggling ring to find Baghdadi.^[18] A U.S. official disputed the Iraqi account that Iraq had provided the exact location of Baghdadi, and stated that the operation was triggered when he appeared in a location where they already had established intelligence collection.^[19]

Location

Reuters reported Iraqi intelligence officials as stating that the arrest of several Islamic State leaders was the key behind learning about Baghdadi's movements and hiding places. They said that Ismael al-Ethawi, believed to be a top aide to Baghdadi, was found and followed by informants in Syria, apprehended by Turkish authorities, and handed over to Iraqi intelligence agents to whom he provided information in February 2018. The Iraqis then gave the information to the CIA, who kept surveillance on the discovered location through a satellite and drones. They also said that in 2019 the United States, Turkish and Iraqi intelligence conducted a joint operation in which they captured several high-ranking ISIL leaders, including four Iraqis and a Syrian, who provided the locations where they met with Baghdadi inside Syria, after which they decided to coordinate with the CIA to deploy more sources inside these areas. One of the Iraqi officials remarked that "his last moment to live" was when Baghdadi and his family left the location that he was in for the first time.^[2] Ethawi and the other aides in an interview to *The New York Times* stated that they were blindfolded before being taken to meet their leader, in order to keep his whereabouts secret, they were then kept at the location for hours before being blindfolded again and driven away from the site.^[20]

Baghdadi's compound was located near GPS coordinates 36.1660, 36.6274, in Syria's Idlib Governorate. Although Idlib is dominated by the Islamic State's rival jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has connections to al-Qaeda,^[21] the Institute for the Study of War warned that Idlib is nevertheless the focus of an ISIL strategy to have it serve as an incubator for the next iteration of ISIL and al-Qaeda recruits.^[22] In July 2019, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford explained that there were around 20,000-30,000 fighters in Idlib by that time in the ongoing Syrian Civil War, which started in 2011. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East Michael P. Mulroy said that "Idlib is essentially the largest collection of al-Qaeda affiliates in the world."^[22] In regards to Baghdadi's possible rationale for choosing the location, "We assess that he was hiding in Idlib province to avoid the intense pressure that had been put on ISIS in other areas of Syria," operational commander Gen. Kenneth McKenzie later stated.^[23]

Documents later obtained by Al Aan TV's Jenan Moussa reportedly revealed that, from 1 February 2019 until the day of the U.S. raid, Baghdadi's compound had internet access and that the owner of the site paid the equivalent of an \$8 monthly fee in cash to the regional ISP for service. According to Moussa, the username Baghdadi used was "mhrab."^[24]

Kurdish role

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reported that they provided direct and extensive support to the operation.^[25] Prior to the raid, the SDF, working with the U.S. government, had spent five months gathering intelligence on Baghdadi's location.^[26] A senior U.S. State Department official said that the Kurdish-led SDF "played a key role" in the raid on Baghdadi's compound and that the United States was in close communication with SDF commander Gen. Mazloun Abdi about every aspect of their operation, and Abdi's statements about the raid, in reference to the joint intelligence cooperation on the ground, were accurate.^[27] Gen. Mazloun Abdi said the operation had been delayed by a month due to Turkey's military build-up at the Syrian border and the Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria that followed.^[19] *The New York Times* reported that unnamed U.S. intelligence, military, and counter-terrorism officials said that the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria by President Donald Trump had complicated the plans for the operation against Baghdadi, but the Syrian Kurds continued to provide information to the CIA amidst the Turkish offensive.^[17] One of the officials remarked that both the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds had provided more intelligence for the raid than any single country.^[17]

CENTCOM commander Frank McKenzie later confirmed the SDF had provided intelligence to American forces prior to the raid in Idlib,^[28] but denied reports that the president's prior order to withdraw forces from north Syria had any impact on the timing or execution of the mission.^[29]

Embedded informant

The Washington Post reported that, according to a U.S. official, an ISIL militant-turned informant for the Kurds had provided critical intelligence about Baghdadi's location.^[30] The SDF commander Mazloun Abdi said that their informant was deep inside Baghdadi's inner circle as a security adviser and had provided a detailed layout of the complex, and was on-site during the operation, after which he left with the U.S. forces.^[31] SDF officials said that the informant had stolen Baghdadi's underwear and a sample of Baghdadi's blood, which was provided to the U.S. intelligence for DNA analysis and resulted in a positive match.^{[31][27]} U.S. and Middle East–based officials stated that the informant was a Sunni Arab ISIL operative, who served as a trusted facilitator and logistics aide to Baghdadi, but defected because ISIL killed his relative, after which he was cultivated as an intelligence asset by the SDF.^[32] They said that, after the SDF leadership handed control over the informant to the U.S. intelligence, the informant was carefully vetted for several weeks by the U.S. intelligence and that the effort to exploit the intelligence asset began in the summer of 2019.^[32] The informant was subsequently extracted from the region with his family two days after the raid and will likely receive at least some of the \$25 million bounty.^[33]

Prelude

Two U.S. officials stated that Baghdadi had been staying at the compound in Barisha since July 2019 and that it had been under surveillance since, but U.S. forces avoided assaulting it due to the presence of al-Qaeda affiliates and the airspace being controlled by Russia and the Syrian government. Some U.S. officials claimed that the Pentagon decided to carry out the mission after President Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria in early October, as to not lose track of Baghdadi.^[34] However, CENTCOM commander Frank McKenzie has stated that the north Syria pullout had "absolutely" no effect on the timing or execution of the operation. "We chose the time based on a

variety of factors: weather, certainty, lunar data ... We struck because the time was about right to do it then given the totality of the intelligence and the other factors that would affect the raid force going in and coming out," General McKenzie added.^[29]

The Turkish Defense Ministry said that Turkish and U.S. military authorities exchanged and coordinated information ahead of the attack in Idlib.^{[35][36]} A U.S. official stated that Turkey was informed prior to the operation to avoid an unintended clash between their forces, but was not notified about the target due to concerns that the information would become compromised and did not provide any assistance to the operation.^[19] Turkish officials also informed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which controls much of the area where the raid took place, not to open fire on the helicopters that would be used in the operation; despite being informed, anti-aircraft fire by HTS was used, however, the operators were detained by HTS commanders afterward for not following orders.^[37]

General McKenzie briefed Defense Department leaders on the intelligence and the plan on October 25 and received the approval of Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley for the operation. President Trump was then briefed "on all aspects of the plan and the risks involved in its execution" and that Russia and Turkey were contacted ahead of the mission to avoid unintended clashes. With Trump's approval, McKenzie, as operational commander, gave the order for the mission to start October 26 around 9 a.m. EST.^{[38][23]}

Raid



From left: U.S. National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, Vice President Mike Pence, President Donald Trump, Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Chairman Mark Milley, and Brigadier general Marcus Evans observe the operation in the White House Situation Room, October 26, 2019

On October 26, 2019, shortly after U.S. president Donald Trump and a small team of key civilian and military leaders gathered in the White House Situation Room at around 5 p.m. EST (23:00 Syria time), U.S. Joint Special Operations Command's 1st SFOD-D (Delta Force) operators, along with U.S. Army Rangers from the 75th Ranger Regiment, departed Al Asad Airbase in Iraq^{[32][5]} in eight U.S. military helicopters, including Boeing MH-47 Chinooks and Sikorsky MH-60L/M Blackhawks,^{[39][38][40]} to conduct an air assault raid on an "isolated compound" 300 meters outside Barisha village—located five kilometers (three miles) south of the border with Turkey in hostile rebel-held territory in Idlib Governorate of Syria—to kill or capture Baghdadi; the assault force reportedly flew through Turkish-controlled and Russian-monitored airspace towards the objective and landed after 70 minutes.^{[5][38][32]}

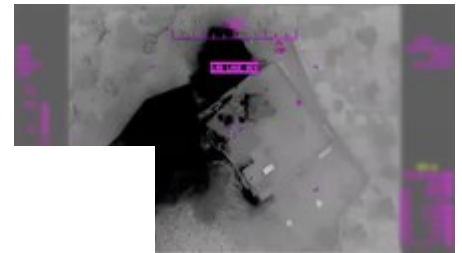
According to General McKenzie, who oversaw the operation, air cover for the assault included armed helicopters, multiple drones, and fighter aircraft providing close air support; they planned for multiple children/non-militants at the compound and tried to minimize casualties. As the heli-borne assault force approached Baghdadi's compound, the helicopters reportedly came under gunfire from two locations from non-ISIL militant groups that were outside the target building but in the area of operations; according to McKenzie, they were neutralized with two airstrikes from supporting helicopters. The Delta Force operators, supported by military working dogs and military robots, landed outside the compound and surrounded it, repeatedly calling on its occupants to come out peacefully in Arabic. "Those who came out of the building were checked for weapons and explosives and moved away," McKenzie said. "U.S. forces detained and later released the noncombatants. The group was treated humanely at all times, and included 11 children."^[23] Five ISIL members inside the compound—

four women and one man—"presented a threat to the force" and were killed when they did not respond to commands to surrender, as they were suspected of wearing suicide vests.^{[34][38]} Believing the main entrance to be booby trapped, operators breached the compound's walls with explosives.^[5]

Once Delta was inside the target building, Baghdadi fled into a tunnel network under the premises wearing a suicide vest and carrying two children with him; by the time he reached a dead end, an explosive ordinance disposal military robot and a dog (later identified as a male Belgian Malinois named "Conan")^[41] had been dispatched to subdue him. He detonated his vest, killing himself and two children, and causing the tunnel to collapse. The children killed were believed to be younger than 12 years old.^[38] U.S. soldiers dug through the debris to retrieve some of Baghdadi's remains and lab technicians successfully conducted DNA profiling and biometrics tests within 15 minutes of his death via Defense Intelligence Agency analysis, confirming Baghdadi's identity. According to the White House, "a combination of visual evidence and DNA tests confirmed Baghdadi's identity." The quick DNA confirmation is attributed to special forces already possessing samples of Baghdadi's tissue, reportedly voluntarily provided by one of his daughters, according to a U.S. official.^{[42][38]} McKenzie, however, stated that they were obtained from his time in Camp Bucca.^[28]



U.S. special operations personnel advance on the target building



A UCAV bombards Baghdadi's compound following extraction of U.S. forces

Two adult male captives and a "substantial" amount of documents and electronic items were seized from the compound during the raid which, per U.S. officials, was a primary goal so they could understand the current leadership structure of ISIL.^[38] Items included 5-6 cellphones, 2-4 laptops and some USB flash drives.^[34] Just before 3:30 am Syrian time, U.S. choppers departed the area for Iraq and the compound was then destroyed by airstrikes from overhead F-15 jets and MQ-9 Reaper drones, reportedly to prevent the site from becoming a "shrine" for sympathizers.^[43] According to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, a wide variety of munitions, including AGM-158 JASSM cruise missiles, unspecified precision-guided bombs, and AGM-114 Hellfire guided missiles were responsible for leveling Baghdadi's compound.^{[44][5][28]}

McKenzie, who called the operation "exquisitely planned and executed,"^[38] stated that the special forces who took part in the operation were based in Syria^{[28][45]} and that only U.S. personnel were involved in the raid on the compound itself.^[46] The entire operation lasted roughly two hours.^[47]

Aftermath

General McKenzie called in and announced the mission's success to President Donald Trump's team in the White House Situation Room, saying "Got him, 100 percent confidence, jackpot, over," according to National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien.^[48]

Trump press conference

At 9:23 p.m. EST, President Trump tweeted "Something very big has just happened!" with the White House subsequently announcing a planned press conference at 9 a.m. the next morning.^[49] At the presser, fourteen hours after the raid, Trump announced Baghdadi's death and went on to describe the

successful operation against him in detail, reporting that U.S. forces used helicopters, jets, and drones through airspace controlled by Russia and Turkey.^[8] He also said that they had Baghdadi "under surveillance for 'a couple of weeks' and 'two or three' raids had been canceled because of his movements". He continued: "The forces targeted the compound using eight helicopters, which were met with hostile fire. The commandos entered the building by blowing holes in the wall, avoiding the main door which was booby-trapped."^[47] Trump announced that Baghdadi died by detonating a suicide vest after he was chased by U.S. military dogs and was cornered inside a tunnel. He and other officials initially stated that the explosion killed three of his children alongside him,^{[47][15]} however General Frank McKenzie later said it had been confirmed only two were killed.^[28] Trump said Baghdadi died "like a dog and a coward" and "whimpering and crying and screaming", but Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley and various Pentagon and administration officials either could not confirm, or outright denied, the "whimpering and crying" detail as Trump reportedly had only seen drone surveillance without live audio.^{[50][51]}



Trump announces the raid to the press in the White House Diplomatic Reception Room on October 27, 2019

Reportedly, some U.S. officials said that Trump's press conference contained several pieces of information that were inaccurate, highly classified, or tactically sensitive.^{[52][53]}

Casualties

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark A. Milley said during a Pentagon briefing that Baghdadi's corpse disposal "was handled appropriately", initially adding that Washington had no plans to release images of his death, but later showed footage of the raid during a briefing on October 30.^{[54][55]} Baghdadi was buried at sea and afforded Islamic rites, three anonymous U.S. officials told Reuters and a Pentagon source told AFP.^{[56][57]} An aide of Baghdadi, who handled logistics, was the other man killed according to Iraqi officials.^[58] United States secretary of state Mike Pompeo said that two wives of al-Baghdadi were also killed in the raid.^[59]

Trump said no U.S. soldiers were injured,^[47] but Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said two had been lightly injured during the raid.^[60] An American Special Operations Military Working Dog (SOMWD), a male Belgian Malinois named Conan,^{[61][62]} who chased Baghdadi, was treated for his injuries and returned to work on October 28. During a news conference that day, Esper and Milley declined to identify him for security reasons; Trump released a declassified photograph of him later in the day.^{[63][64]} The dog was injured due to live electrical cables that were exposed, according to McKenzie.^[34]

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) war monitor, Delta Force killed nine people, including one child, two women and some high-ranking ISIL leaders.^[65] Baghdadi's suicide vest killed two more children, reportedly his own. The Americans captured two militants and rescued eleven children.^{[66][15]} General Frank McKenzie said six ISIL members, which included four women and another man besides from Baghdadi, were killed in the operation. The raid also killed about 10 to 15 members of other groups who engaged American forces.^[10]

Delta also killed a local Guardians of Religion Organization commander,^[67] identified as Abu Muhammad al-Halabi, the owner of the house Baghdadi was staying at.^[7] An Iraqi intelligence official and Hisham al-Hashimi have stated to The Independent that Halabi was also a smuggler, which is why the ISIL head and his family utilized his services.^[68] The inhabitants of the village stated that he was a sheep seller, but rarely interacted with his neighbors.^[58] His other alias is believed to be Abu Mohammed Salama and his corpse was flown away by Delta Force after the raid according to Barisha's inhabitants. He, along with some other Hurras al-Din, members is also suspected to have been part of a pro-ISIL faction.^[69]



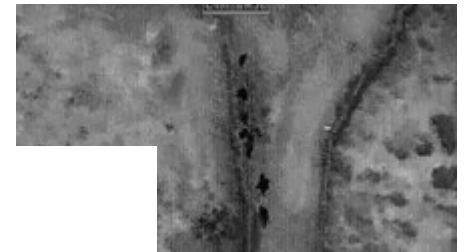
Conan, the American Special Operations Military Working Dog that chased after Baghdadi

Based on a receipt book of ISIL found by associates of former American intelligence official Asaad Almohammad, analysts have stated that Baghdadi was paying the members of the group in exchange for hiding him. According to the receipt book, ISIL paid at least \$67,000 to them from early 2017 to mid-2018, including \$7,000 in summer 2018 to prepare bases for ISIL fighters from "al-Khair province", hinting that they helped in smuggling ISIL members. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi pointed to the fact that the two groups were enemies, citing a warning by Hurras al-Din to its members in February 2019 to avoid contact with ISIL and the latter issuing the similar statement about the former in July.^[34] However, Tamimi also said that some of the receipts might be fabrications, except the ones from March to July 2018 that he was shown.^[70]

Possible civilian casualties

Besides the two children killed by Baghdadi's suicide detonation, the U.S. military reported no civilian casualties during the operation.

A report by NPR released on December 3, 2019, cited a local farmer, Barakat Ahmad Barakat, as saying that his right hand and forearm were blown off and his two friends were killed by U.S. helicopter fire during the operation. According to Barakat's account, Khaled Mustafa Qurmo and Khaled Abdel Majid Qurmo, two cousins, were driving him home in Barisha on October 26 when helicopters fired on their white van. All three exited the vehicle, but one fell, his legs filled with shrapnel. A follow-up strike targeted the group again, killing the two cousins and blowing off a chunk of Barakat's right arm. The cousins died of shrapnel wounds to the chest, according to autopsy reports by a Syrian doctor with the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, an international medical group. Several relatives said the cousins operated a van service and had no connection to ISIL or any armed group; Barakat said the van carried no weapons. Relatives provided video and photos of the scene and the destroyed van to NPR.^[14]



U.S. helicopters engage hostile targets in support of ground forces near Baghdadi's compound, October 26, 2019. Excluding the two children killed due to Baghdadi's suicide, the U.S. military said there were no civilian casualties during the operation.

An unidentified U.S. defense official told NPR by email that it was the first civilian casualty report they received related to the raid, and that initial reports suggested that a white van in the vicinity had fired on U.S. helicopters. "Surveillance footage will be reviewed to determine if an investigation needs to be opened based upon this additional information," the official said. Former Pentagon intelligence analyst Marc Garlasco suggested the shrapnel damage at the scene resembled that caused by Hydra 70 rockets, a

type used by U.S. military helicopters. Garlasco also suggested the secondary strikes on the men fleeing the van was consistent with a U.S. military practice of targeting "squirters"—people perceived to be hostiles running away from an attack.^[14]

The U.S. military has not confirmed whether it fired on the white van during the raid.^[14]

Analysis

A November 6, 2019 Brookings Institution analysis framed the raid's success as a reminder of the United States' "power and resolve" in the War on Terror, remarking on three particular aspects of the operation: intelligence collection, international cooperation, and operational capability. Brookings asserted that it was a combination of U.S. hard power and soft power that secured cooperation with Turkey, Russia, Iraq and the Kurds and noted that a synergized combination of HUMINT, SIGINT, and visual intelligence gathering was the key to translating the ISIL informant's information into actionable operational intelligence, such as how the deployment of military dogs indicated U.S. forces were expecting close-quarters obstacles thanks to intelligence reports. The analysis stated that despite Baghdadi's eight years of experience evading capture or death, the operation succeeded due to the U.S. professionally utilizing the "Find, Fix, Finish" intelligence cycle standard: Narrow down Baghdadi's suspected location (the Find), verify his identity and location and translate the intelligence into a feasible action plan (the Fix), and subdue the target (the Finish).^[71]

A November 19, 2019 Department of Defense Inspector General report, citing Defense Intelligence Agency assessments, stated that Baghdadi's death was "a significant blow to ISIS but would not likely end the ISIS threat" and that his demise "would likely have little effect on the ability of ISIS to reconstitute" itself as a potent transnational threat, according to open-source analysis.^[72] A report from the DIA in 2020 concluded that Baghdadi's death did not have an immediate impact on ISIL's abilities to operate, as the group's command structure was fairly decentralized by the time of the raid.^[73]

Reactions

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said the raid was the outcome of intelligence sharing between parties on the ground and thanked those involved in the operation.^[74]



Statement by SDF spokesman Redur Khalil on Baghdadi's death

ISIL response and subsequent operations

News of the death of Baghdadi was ignored by official ISIL channels for days and the group did not immediately confirm his death. Many ISIL supporters refused to believe he was dead, while some others accepted it.^[75] Supporters of ISIL's rival jihadist groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda praised his death because of his group's noted record for cruelty. Salafi cleric Abdullah al-Muhaysini celebrated Baghdadi's demise and called on ISIL members to defect. The activity of jihadist supporters in general temporarily decreased online as well.^[76]

ISIL's Amaq News Agency confirmed Baghdadi's death on October 31 and announced Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as his successor.^[77] Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi became their new spokesman after its prior spokesperson, Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, was killed in an October 27 U.S. strike in northwest Syria

following the Barisha raid. In an audio message, Hamza al-Qurayshi described U.S. President Donald Trump as "a crazy old man" and warned the U.S. to "not rejoice" and that ISIL supporter would avenge Baghdadi's death.^[78]

Since Baghdadi's death several of the leaders operating under him have been killed or captured, along with some of his family members:





On November 4, Turkish communications director Fahrettin Altun stated that Rasmiya Awad, Baghdadi's lesser-known older sister, had been captured. According to Reuters, citing Turkish officials, Awad was captured in a raid on a shipping container in the Turkish-controlled Syrian border town of Azaz and that Turkish authorities were interrogating her husband and daughter-in-law who were also detained. When captured, she was also accompanied by five children. "We hope to gather a trove of intelligence from Baghdadi's sister on the inner workings of ISIS," Altun stated. Little independent information is available on Baghdadi's sister and Reuters was not immediately able to verify if the captured individual was her.^{[79][80]}

On December 3, Iraqi security forces announced the capture of Baghdadi's "deputy" who operated under the name "Abu Khaldoun". According to security officials, a police unit in Hawija, Kirkuk Governorate, Iraq, tracked down Khaldoun to an apartment in the March 1 area where he was hiding; he possessed a fake I.D. under the name of Shaalan Obeid when apprehended. Khaldoun was previously ISIL's "military prince" of Iraq's Saladin Governorate.^[81]

On December 26, Boko Haram, the West African branch of ISIL, killed 11 captives in what the group called a "message for Christians" and a retaliation for the killing of Baghdadi and Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir.^[82]

International

Representatives of several countries, including Australia,^[83] France,^[84] Israel,^[85] and the United Kingdom,^[84] congratulated the United States and said that the death of Baghdadi marked a turning point in the fight against ISIL.

-  Russia – Russian spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the raid's result, if confirmed, represented a serious contribution by the United States toward combating terrorism.^[83]
-  Iran – Iran, on the other hand, stated that Baghdadi's death was not significant and that the actions of the United States are responsible for the rise of ISIL. Iran said that the killing of Baghdadi did not mean the group's end, as sectarianism and terrorism still very much exist and are being exploited by countries like the U.S.^[86]
-  Syria – In an interview with the French magazine Paris Match published on November 27, 2019, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad dismissed any suggestion the Syrian government had anything to do with the raid and affirmed his skepticism of the operation's success, calling it a "fantastic play staged by the Americans" and quipping "...was al-Baghdadi really killed or not?" Assad made similar remarks to Syria TV weeks prior, calling the operation "little more than a trick" and likening U.S. politics to Hollywood.^[87]
-  Saudi Arabia – Mohammed bin Salman commended Trump on the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, describing the event as a turning point in the fight against extremism. Saudi Arabia said Baghdadi had perverted the reputation of Islam and welcomed his death at the hands of US commandos. The kingdom said it is thankful to the US for its efforts to track members of this terrorist organization.^[88]

-  **Egypt** – Egypt said the death marked a significant achievement in the efforts to combat extremism. The country also advocated for a comprehensive approach that acknowledged the security, developmental, and theoretical dimensions in the battle against armed actors.^[89]
-  **Turkey** – President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said al-Baghdadi's killing was a turning point in the fight against terrorism.^[90]
-  **Afghanistan** – Afghanistan praised al-Baghdadi's killing as a significant blow and anticipated it would weaken ISIL's activities in Afghanistan.^[91]
-  **Jordan** – Jordan characterized al-Baghdadi's death as a major step in the battle against terrorists and their principles of hate. The country also said it will remain on the frontlines to eradicate extremism in partnership with its allies.^[92]
-  **Bahrain** – Bahrain lauded the raid and said it was a "fatal blow to the group."^[93]
-  **Japan** – Japan said the death of al-Baghdadi was a crucial turning point towards serenity and stability in the Middle East. However, the country also cautioned that the war against terrorism had not ended.^[94]
-  **Philippines** – The Philippines said Baghdadi's death was only a temporary setback for the group because of ISIL's comprehensiveness and reach worldwide.^[95]
-  **Iraq** – Iraq noted its part in locating Baghdadi and said it would continue to track and prosecute the organization.^[96]
-  **Sri Lanka** – The prime minister of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe congratulated President Donald Trump after the raid. He said that IS has been fomenting horror and dismay across the globe and that the operation makes the world a more secure place.^[97]
-  **Germany** – The German government took the time to reflect on the victims of IS after the raid. Government spokesman Steffen Seibert said Baghdadi can't order any more killings, but added that the fight against the organization will continue.^[98]
-  **United Nations** – U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said the death of Baghdadi was a good time to remember the casualties of terrorism. U.N. deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said that IS had perpetrated wicked human rights violations and ushered in disaster and death to thousands of men, women, and children. Lastly, he added the world has made visible progress against Daesh.^[99]
-  **European Union** – The European Union said the death of Baghdadi was a major blow to the organization but warned that it still remains a major threat.^[100]
-  **NATO** – NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg stated the raid was a great accomplishment in the efforts against global terrorism.^[101]

See also

- Death of Osama bin Laden, similar raid that targeted al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in 2011.
- List of United States special forces raids during the Syrian Civil War
- Battle of Baghuz Fawqani
- Turkey–ISIL conflict
- Rojava–Islamist conflict
- Assassination of Qasem Soleimani, targeted killing of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani in 2020.

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EXHIBIT I:

Oct. 27, 2020

Twitter thread

New York Times Magazine contributing
writer Azmat Khan



Thread

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Azmat Khan ✓
@AzmatZahra

After the U.S. raid targeting Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, NPR's @DanielEstrin & @lalarian uncovered claims that Syrian civilians were killed & wounded, tracking down a survivor.

A year later, NPR followed up on the case & how the U.S. military responded...



Pentagon Says 2 Men Killed In Baghdadi Raid Were Combatants But Offers Lit...
After NPR reported claims of civilian deaths in the operation against the ISIS chief, Central Command says the men showed "hostile intent," but it found no ...
[npr.org](https://www.npr.org)

11:43 PM · Oct 27, 2020 · Twitter Web App

40 Retweets 6 Quote Tweets 48 Likes

- Reply icon
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Azmat Khan ✓ @AzmatZahra · 21h
Replying to @AzmatZahra

"We had pumpkin seeds & bought coffee on the road and were having fun," survivor Barakat told NPR. "We were driving through the village of Barisha. At that moment, the helicopters arrived. Suddenly, we were hit. I didn't know what was going on. I was just trying to escape death."

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Azmat Khan ✓ @AzmatZahra · 21h

"The men fled the van, but one of them collapsed with shrapnel in his legs. Barakat said he cradled his friend outside the van when helicopter fire hit them again, killing the cousins and tearing off Barakat's hand that had been holding up his friend's head."

- Reply icon (1)
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Azmat Khan ✓ @AzmatZahra · 21h

NPR collected testimony from the survivor, video of the aftermath, and autopsy reports... Despite a wealth of evidence gathered, the U.S. military told NPR it assessed the civilian casualty allegation to be non-credible...

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Azmat Khan ✓ @AzmatZahra · 21h

The military told NPR that Barakat & others in the car were targeted after they demonstrated "hostile intent" by not turning around when the militia fired "warning shots" & because after direct fire, the men fled towards th

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compound—instead of away—without their hands up.

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This case echoes criticisms that academics & legal scholars have been making for years about how the military decides what "hostile intent" is.

Two detailed studies:

By @Tom_Gregory: journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.117...

By @HarvardLawHRP: justsecurity.org/wp-content/upl...

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They argue it's not just about a few cases, but a recurring problem in the military's targeting process & tactics / techniques/ procedures:

Do civilians even know what a "warning shot" is? That it means to turn around? That they should put their hands up after being hit by fire?

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Based on my interviews with hundreds of civilians in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, almost none of them know these things. Instead, when being fired upon, most civilians' immediate instinct is to panic and try to escape by speeding up or finding cover/ a place to hide from fire.

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Civilians don't think of these actions as hostile intent. But if the military isn't interviewing civilian survivors for their casualty assessments—like they didn't do in this case or hundreds of others—are they really trying to understand whether their targeting process is sound?

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(ROOZ) مصطفی شعبان @shban1575 · 13h

Replying to @AzmatZahra @DanielEstrin and @alalarian

هذا ليس شيء غريب على الجيش الامركي..
فهوا يقتل ويدمر ويخرج احد ضباط الجيش ويقول انهم نجحوا بالعملية التي قاموا بها ولا يتكلم عن الاخطاء او الخسائر
السبب لانهم من الطبقة الفقيرة...💔

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<https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-extra/2020/10/13/923308266/npr-wins-eight-edward-r-murrow-awards>

NPR

2 min read

NPR Wins Eight Edward R. Murrow Awards





RTDNA

This weekend, teams across NPR (virtually) took home eight Edward R. Murrow Awards from the Radio Television Digital News Association. A huge congratulations to all of the teams below:

- **Winner, "Excellence in Innovation"** - the NPR Student Podcast Challenge, from the Education team.

- **Winner, "Continuing Coverage"** - "'There Is No Protection': Exposing the Remain In Mexico Policy," a series of stories from the National Desk immigration team and from *Morning Edition* and **Noel King's** trip to the U.S.-Mexico border. This is the third year in a row that NPR's immigration coverage has won this award.
- **Winner, "Excellence in Sound"** - the Science Desk project *After the Water*. The winning radio piece was by **Rebecca Hersher** and aired on *All Things Considered*.
- **Winner, "Excellence in Writing"** - the *Hidden Brain* piece "The Ventilator: Life, Death And The Choices We Make At The End."
- **Winner, "Hard News"** - the piece "Syrians Say Innocent Civilians Were Killed In U.S. Raid On Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi," from **Daniel Estrin**, which aired on *All Things Considered*.
- **Winner, "News Series"** - for reporting about the TEACH Grant Program. The winning piece included **Cory Turner, Chris Arnold, and Kenny Malone** and aired on *Planet Money*.
- **Winner, "Multimedia"** - the "TahoeLand 'Trawling for Clarity'" project with CapRadio and NPR.
- **Winner, "Sports Reporting"** - "Learning to Swim With 7-Foot-5 Celtic Tacko Fall," a piece from *Only a Game*.

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The Radio Television Digital News Association has been honoring outstanding achievements in electronic journalism with the Edward R. Murrow Awards since 1971. Award recipients demonstrate the spirit of excellence that Murrow set as a standard for the profession of electronic journalism.

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