

Background Press Call By Senior Administration Officials On U.S. Counterterrorism Operations in Syria

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Briefing Room

• Speeches and Remarks

Via Teleconference

8:49 A.M. EST

MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us on short notice. Today's call is going to be on background, attributed to "senior administration officials," and the contents will be embargoed until the President concludes his remarks later this morning, probably at about 9:45 a.m., but please watch the feed and we will confirm when the embargo has lifted.

Our speakers today are going to be [senior administration official] and [senior administration official]. We'll turn it over to [senior administration official] and [senior administration official] for some opening comments, and then we're happy to take your questions.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you. I will give about a 10-minute opening on what happened last night and then turn it over to [senior administration official].

Operating on the President's orders, U.S. military forces, last night, successfully targeted Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi, also known as Hajji Abdullah, the leader of ISIS and the successor to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Hajji Abdullah coordinated the group's global terror operations to include directing operations that posed a direct threat to the American people and our partners around the world.

He was a driving force behind the genocide of the Yazidi religious minority in northwestern Iraq in 2014 and the enslavement of thousands of young Yazidi girls, using rape as a weapon of war.

He oversaw the network that included ISIS branches around the world, from Africa to Afghanistan.

He was directly overseeing activities of ISIS across Iraq and Syria, which were seeking to reconstitute under his leadership.

The world is a safer place with him gone.

Let me provide some context on the President's command and direction of yesterday's operation, and then I'll turn it over to my colleague at DOD to provide some updates and tactical aspects.

This operation has been months in planning. The President was first briefed on the operation in depth over a month ago by the operational commanders and after we learned that Hajji Abdullah was definitely in this site.

The President was regularly updated by his national security team on the planning details of this operation, to include a brief in the Oval Office earlier this week.

He gave the final go on this operation on Tuesday morning, with the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Milley, in the Oval Office.

Last night, the President monitored key aspects of the operation in real-time in the White House Situation Room, receiving reports from the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General McKenzie and their teams.

This operation is consistent with the President's commitment to take out threats to the American people wherever they are and in any manner that does not require large deployments of U.S. forces.

We are especially grateful for our local partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces, whose support was essential to the mission's success and with whom we will continue to relentlessly pursue remnants of ISIS and its leadership.

Let me say a few words about the operation itself. The President, of course, directed the Department of Defense to take every precaution to minimize noncombatant casualties in this operation.

That was particularly challenging here because Hajji Abdullah seemed to purposefully live in a residential building, with families on the first floor that we believe had nothing to do with ISIS and did not know who was living on the third floor.

Hajji Abdullah never left the house. He commanded by couriers who came and went. He used these innocent people as his shield.

It was due to the risk of this unwitting family and other civilians in the area that President Biden ordered this air assault operation, placing our own troops at risk to minimize the risk to others. And they succeeded in that mission.

In the earliest stages of the operation, a family on the first floor — one woman, one man, and a number of children — were safely removed from the site.

Unfortunately, ISIS once again revealed its barbarity. In a final act of cowardice and disregard for human life, Hajji Abdullah detonated a blast — a significant blast — killing himself and several others, including his wife and children.

This is the same terrorist tactic of his predecessor: taking his own life and his own family, rather than face justice or stand and fight on his own. Both these terrorist leaders murdered their own families.

In this case, the blast was so large, on the third floor, that it blew bodies outside of the house and into the surrounding areas.

All casualties at the site were due to the acts of ISIS terrorists inside the residence, including Hajji Abdullah, who set off this charge destroying most of the third floor.

An associate of Hajji Abdullah — another ISIS terrorist, an ISIS lieutenant — barricaded himself and members of his own family in the second floor. He and his wife engaged the assault force. They were killed in the course of the operation.

After the second ISIS terrorist was eliminated, an additional number of children came out of the second-floor dwelling area and were safely removed from the site.

ISIS has made clear over and over again its utter and complete disregard for human life. And that was clearly on display throughout the operation last night.

Looking ahead, the terrorist threats we face today are more ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse than 20 years ago. Groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda have expanded across Africa and Southeast Asia. These global networks and affiliates still aspire to attack the United States.

Years of sustained counterterrorism operations, pressure has forced them to shift their operating models and constrain their capabilities, but the threat remains serious.

Our partnership at the international, national, and local levels are vital to our success. And this is not solely a military effort. Working in concert with a global coalition of over 80 partners who are working to share intelligence, repatriate foreign fighters, prosecute ISIS leaders, and perhaps most importantly, deescalate regional conflicts and stabilize former ISIS safe havens to ensure these groups can not — never again resurge and threaten the American people.

President Biden has redoubled our commitment to stabilizing areas liberated from ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and recommitted to our vital partnerships in the region to include the counter-ISIS coalition, NATO, and our local and regional partners, all of whom remain essential to this ongoing effort.

The bottom line is that President Biden remains steadfast in his commitment to protecting the American people from the threat posed by terrorist groups. Last night's successful action took a major terrorist leader and his lieutenant off the battlefield, makes it clear that we will hold anyone accountable who seeks to harm Americans at home or around the world.

And I think the key facts of this operation, again, just show the barbarity of these ISIS terrorists. All the casualties at the site were due specifically to their actions, including the significant detonation of Hajji Abdullah and the decision of his lieutenant to barricade himself on a second-floor room and engage U.S. assault forces.

And with that, I will turn it over to my colleague at the Department of Defense.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you. So, ladies and gentlemen, just to give you a little bit more background on the specific operational aspects to reinforce some of what was earlier said: So, this is an operation that has been long in planning and, from a tactical perspective, went precisely as expected.

The overall goal here was to remove Hajji Abdullah from the battlefield, and that was successful. Much of what was built into this operation was explicitly and predictably based on protecting non-combatants. We had good sense of who was in the building, as has already been briefed, and had taken numerous safeguards throughout the rehearsals and planning to protect those individuals.

What we can't account for, of course, is actions taken by the targeted individuals themselves. And in this case, it appears that they chose to detonate explosives or take other hostile action that resulted in the deaths of their relatives.

And with that, we can go through some of the details here of some of the operational mechanics for your benefit.

So, with the idea that noncombatants would be protected, it was an explicit decision to conduct a raid as opposed to a standoff strike of any sort. With that, the raid force took a number of steps, including conducting call-outs — so, announcing their presence, asking people to leave the building, which resulted in some of the innocents coming out, as already has been briefed. We were conscious of the fact that this is a residential area and there were also children in the building.

There were also multiple messages to local components around — this would be civilians and others — to ensure that they knew what was underway and didn't in some way interfere, unintended or intended.

But intense care taken throughout the operation. Much of this was built, again, on the idea that we knew that this was a complex target.

I will highlight a few other things just because we know it's been out there already. Once again, the target for this operation was the ISIS — overall ISIS Amir, Hajji Abdullah. There were other reports of other targets — al Qaeda and others. That's not — that's not truthful.

There was a situation in which one of our helicopters had a mechanical issue, and so it was properly disposed of some distance from the site; it had nothing to do with any kind of hostile action. This was a mechanical issue, best we can tell at this early stage.

And then, further in the course of what was nearly two hours on the ground — which was the plan initially and continued to be the plan that was carried out — towards the end of that period, there was hostile action from local forces. I think it's important to keep in mind that this area is controlled by, in many cases, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which is, by our estimate, a group that is a terrorist group; it certainly has al Qaeda affiliations.

At least some of those individuals engaged one of our helicopters, and we took action that resulted in, as we know it at this point, at least two enemy killed in action. So some of the reports from the ground will highlight that as well.

That's the operational laydown that augments what was already said.

I'll turn it back over to [moderator].

MODERATOR: Thanks very much. Operator, we're ready for questions.

Q Hi, thanks. Real quick: Please give me a sense of how many civilians you estimate were killed. And what was the mechanical issue with the helicopter? And finally, was this ISIS leader in any way connected to the bombing at Abbey Gate? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Phil, let me just say: Some of the numbers that are reported out there do not align with our information. We believe the number of children that came out of this site, according to the force that oversaw this and would monitor it in real-time, a number of eight children were removed from the site safely.

The casualties were all from the third-floor detonation of Hajji Abdullah's — the third-floor dwelling area, and the barricaded — his lieutenant on the second floor. Those were the only casualties on the site.

And some of the numbers out there don't align with our information, but I can't say specifically how many people Hajji Abdullah had with him when he decided to murder them.

On the second question, I'll turn it over to DOD.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, Phil, so the helicopter was a mechanical issue on the insertion; that, ultimately, that helicopter was able to extract itself from the immediate target area and, under control, able to land in another location where the decision was made to disable it and destroy it.

So, no casualties on the U.S. side throughout. I think we highlighted that, but certainly not with the helicopter.

And then, on your last question on Abbey Gate: The Abbey Gate attack, of course, was ISIS Khorasan, which is an affiliate of ISIS and recognizes Hajji Abdullah as the overall Amir of ISIS. So that's the connection we would draw.

Over.

Q Hi, yes. Can you just describe again how it happened on the second floor with the lieutenant and who was killed and who was — how many survivors came out of that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Eric, so the assault force on the second floor, we knew that Hajji Abdullah lived in this residence with another ISIS terrorist, lieutenant of his. And he was involved in making sure that — even though Hajji Abdullah, again, never left his residence, because he used these — his own family and the residents — the family on the first floor, including a number of children — basically as his human shields.

The lieutenant kind of helped him run day-to-day operations. Again, couriers came in and out. So we knew this lieutenant was in the house. And he barricaded himself in a room on the second floor and engaged U.S. forces, as did his wife.

After that, the threat from them was eliminated. As I mentioned, four children came out of the second-floor dwelling areas. The ISIS lieutenant and his wife were killed. And they may have had their children — don't know numbers — with them in that room. So that's something that still has to be confirmed.

But four — after that engagement, four children came out of the second floor and were safely — were brought to safety.

I have to say, I think you can get a sense of the complications of this and the care that went into it. I've seen some reporting that the fact that the operation lasted two hours was unusual.

I think, as [senior administration official] said, everything here ran, really, according to clockwork. And as the planning went, we were in the Situation Room for the two hours of the operation on the ground, as was planned.

And I think the complications was just because the leader of ISIS decided to run this global terror network in a house with an innocent family and others living on the first floor.

Over.

Q Hey, good morning. Thanks very much. I'm wondering — I know you said that this mission was in planning stages for a long time. Can you say whether the raid on a prison in Syria by ISIS and the recapturing of that, whether that played at all into the timeline of actually carrying out this operation?

And secondly, what is your assessment of the extent to which this killing will affect the future of ISIS in Syria and abroad?

And lastly, if you can just talk at all about any of the intelligence that led to that raid — what type of intelligence, and how the U.S. came to act on that intelligence. Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So this is [senior administration official]. Let me just — as the intelligence came in — that we believed we had a lead on Hajji Abdullah — of course, the President was briefed on this immediately and directed all of the whole

interagency and national security team following these issues to make sure we did everything we possibly could to confirm his identity, and then, the President, obviously directing his military intelligence team to find the best mechanism to take this terrorist off the battlefield.

So, that whole process was really months — months in process. The final fix of this certainty that this was Hajji Abdullah, I think it's safe to say about early December or so.

And the President was briefed in December in detail, including, again, operational commanders came in to the Situation Room and briefed the President on a number of possible options for taking down this terrorist target, including the extraordinary complexity because of the number of children in the area, the families on the first floor, and the fact that Hajji Abdullah, with the exception of sometimes going to pray on his roof, never came out of the house. He ran ISIS through couriers and by staying on the third floor of his residence.

So, an incredibly complex endeavor. The President was directly involved throughout these deliberations, a constant give-and-take with his commanders and the national security team. And, again, gave the final go for this operation on Tuesday morning in the Oval Office.

So, this was a process that was obviously months in work by our intelligence community to find a fixed location and our military team to develop options to present to the President.

So, that was basically the process here.

The prison — Hajji Abdullah directly was overseeing these operations in Syria, and including the prison, we believe. But, no, the timing of the operation was not — was not tied to the prison operation at Hasakah.

[Senior administration official], anything else you want to add?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll just pick up on that theme, to answer the third question. So, we think the impact of Hajji Abdullah being removed is going to be a blow to ISIS because he's — even while Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was the Amir, Hajji Abdullah was heavily involved in running many of the operations, including many of the external operations; as was already alluded to, was certainly influential in what was multiple threat streams against the Hasakah prison.

So, we anticipate that this is going to lead to disruption within ISIS. He's really one of the few remaining, shall we call them "legacy leaders." And so, this is a continued push that has been underway for quite some time to continue to remove the leadership elements of ISIS.

Over.

Q Thanks, [senior administration official]. Let me ask you, kind of, broadly, in the aftermath. The United States has killed Bin Laden and Baghdadi and now the latest ISIS leader. What is the state of jihadism? You mentioned how — its global spread. How much harder is it for the United States to counter its efforts? How much better off or worse off are we than in the early days?

Secondly, can you describe the Situation Room and what, you know, some of the atmospherics of what Biden was doing. Were there moments of tension? Were there moments of — (inaudible) of work?

And finally, the SDF, how much of a role did it play in the initial intelligence — locating this guy, doing the legwork and the prep for this raid?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me hit some of that. Just on the state of ISIS — of course, it wasn't long ago, Robin, you were covering — they controlled a caliphate with 8 million people and were carrying out attacks all around the world in Paris, Brussels, elsewhere.

Obviously, it's significantly degraded. The leader of ISIS, Hajji Abdullah, hiding in a residential area, living on a third floor of a residential facility, but still in command of ISIS through a network of couriers and a global network, which obviously we have pretty good fidelity into.

So I think just the extraordinary work of our professionals who do this day-to-day, very difficult work are keeping the American people safe. And I'll turn it over to [senior administration official] for some more details on the state of the global jihad situation.

The SDF is essential. We cannot do any of this without them. So, just critical. I don't want to get into any details, but critical, vital enablers for operations like this.

In the Situation Room, we've monitored the operation in real-time, again, from shortly before the forces on the ground to when they landed. The President came in with the Vice President and was receiving real-time reports from, as I mentioned, Lloyd Austin and General Milley and Frank McKenzie in real time. So it was real-time monitoring. We were able to monitor the situation with the helicopter mechanical failure. The fact that — which we were all very focused on. Obviously, tremendous tension, just given the number of children we knew were in the house, on the first floor.

It was a relief when one of the first reports was that when the team came on site and called everyone to come out, those on the first floor did come out and were led to safety. Because, obviously, that was a key point of concern and why this operation was so complex.

There was then a report, before the assault force went into the house, of the significant explosion on the third floor, which later confirmed was Hajji Abdullah detonated basically the third floor — the third floor of the residence, killing himself and murdering his own family. That happened fairly early in the operation.

And then, the second floor, a terrorist barricading himself and engaging our forces.

So this all kind of ran, you know, kind of in a linear fashion throughout the operation.

We also had the engagement, as [senior administration official] mentioned, with one of our helicopters, which we were able to — also able to monitor.

The President was obviously pleased with the reports from his commanders — tremendous praise for our team. And when the team was wheels up, the President left the Situation Room. He said, “God bless our troops.” And I think Jake kept him informed throughout the night because they had to do another couple of stops to obviously get to safety. And that was the operation.

So, a very — after months of planning, the President being very steeped in the operational details. The commanders, as I mentioned, came into the Situation Room in December with a tabletop model of this site, which demonstrated where Hajji Abdullah was and the complexity of this operation.

This was not without significant, significant risk, both to our force, just given the forces who are in this area, as [senior administration official] mentioned, and also just the nature of this dwelling and the way Hajji Abdullah decided to conduct his affairs. Incredibly complex, high risk.

And the President just — at the end just praised the professionalism — incredible professionalism of our forces.

Anything else to add, [senior administration official]?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Maybe just briefly on the overall global terrorist situation.

So I think, as already mentioned, ISIS has really been focused on — even though their caliphate has been degraded and many of their leaders have been killed or captured — continues to at least express the intent to conduct attacks against the United States and the West.

But the capability that has been pretty significantly degraded, starting with a series of leadership losses and then the rollback of the territory that [senior administration official] alluded to that they controlled until 2019 — we nonetheless see an expansion of ISIS branches and networks to over three dozen different countries. But a lot of that is overseen from ISIS Khor — Hajji Abdullah and others.

We have, on balance, seen fewer attacks against the United States and Western interest in recent years. And we assess that that’s a large function of the pressure that the coalition, some of the local allies, like the SDF and the United States, have placed on the network.

Over.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: If I can give one more — just one more anecdote. We, of course, considered that Hajji Abdullah, on the third floor, might detonate himself in the operation, just given the record here — Baghdadi, for example.

And our engineers from our military team studying the structure, from the modeling they were able to do, did determine that if in the early phase of the operation Hajji Abdullah were to set off a detonation, that the structure would not collapse. Because one of our main concerns was that he would kill himself and the structure would collapse, killing everyone else in the building.

So, we had high confidence that if this went according to how we thought it might go and did go — that he detonated himself and murdered his own family — it would not collapse the building and kill the other people in the building.

I doubt he knew that when he set off that detonation, so he obviously had every intent to take his own life and murder his own family, and at the very least, reckless disregard for everyone else in the building.

We had high confidence that if he did that, as he did, that the building would remain structurally sound as it did. But I just want to emphasize, I doubt he knew that. And it was probably his intent to kill everybody in that building.

But I think that just shows the level of detail that went into planning this operation. And that fact was discussed a number of times with the President — if Hajji Abdullah were to detonate himself, would the building remain structurally sound, and it did.

Q Hey, good morning. Thanks for having this call. Just a couple points of clarification. One, with the helicopter mechanical issue, was there any kind of hard landing or crash? And then, two, it sounds to me like U.S. forces were definitely outside the building when the explosion happened. Do you have any estimate for how far away? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, the first issue on the helicopter: No, no hard landing. This was the issue that resulted upon the immediate infil. And the helicopter was able to depart the target location and move to another location, at which point it was determined that it was not going to be feasible for it to return to the next location for the return flight.

So, the decision was made to destroy it in place, well distant from the target location. So, well beyond any kind of visual range.

On the question of the distance, as [senior administration official] already alluded to and as extensive experience over the years has shown, oftentimes the tactic used by these types of people barricaded, especially those known to wear suicide vests, is to explode themselves or the building they're in. So the assault force was well outside the range of what we assessed to be the likely explosive impact. And as a result, none of the assaulters were injured in the initial blast, which, again, as [senior administration official] alluded to, occurred very quickly in the operation, shortly after the initial call-out and shortly after the family on the first floor departed.

So, we assessed that to have gone as we had — as part of our planning. And certainly think that Hajji Abdullah knew that his minutes were numbered, or he was at least going to be captured, and decided to take out not only the third floor but also the women and children with him.

Over.

MODERATOR: Thanks, everyone. That concludes our call today. A reminder that we were on background, attributed to “senior administration officials” and that the contents of this call are embargoed until the President finishes speaking this morning.

We expect that he will go out shortly after 9:30 and give brief remarks. So, hopefully, that will be before 10:00 a.m. when we’re able to lift the embargo.

Thanks all for joining, and have a good day. Bye-bye.

9:19 A.M. EST