

Countering “ISIS at Large” in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Examining CENTCOM’s mix of unilateral and partnered operations against senior ISIS officials in Syria provides useful insights into the group’s current capabilities and the focus of U.S. attention in the region.

In U.S. Central Command’s 2022 “year in review” statement (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3255908/centcom-year-in-review-2022-the-fight-against-isis/>) on the current status of the fight against the Islamic State, commanding general Michael Kurilla highlighted three categories: (1) “ISIS in detention,” meaning the thousands of men and boys affiliated with the group and held in Iraqi and Syrian prisons; (2) the “potential next generation of ISIS,” meaning the approximately **55,000 women and minors** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/detention-facilities-syria-iraq-remain-vulnerable-islamic-state-attacks>) held in camps; and (3) “ISIS at large,” meaning the leaders and operatives that the United States and its partners “are currently fighting in Iraq and Syria.” Although Gen. Kurilla praised the ongoing effort to militarily degrade ISIS, he also noted that the group’s ideology persists, and that “partnered operations” are needed to keep up the pressure. This view aligns with the pivot in U.S. strategy in Syria over the past year and a half, from a military mission to “advising, assisting, and enabling” local partners. At the same time, however, U.S. forces have continued launching unilateral strikes against ISIS leaders in Syria as recently as this month.

Targeting ISIS in 2022

Soon after ISIS declared its so-called “caliphate” in June 2014, the United States and its partners founded the “Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS,” which has since expanded to include eighty-five member states. That same year, CENTCOM stood up the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to organize the military mission against ISIS. Yet U.S. and coalition strategy later evolved after ISIS was territorially defeated in March 2019, with CENTCOM adopting an “advise, assist, and enable” approach with local partners in December 2021.

Indeed, the majority of operations conducted against ISIS since that date have involved partners. In Syria, for example, CENTCOM’s year in review statement noted that 108 operations were carried out with partners in 2022, compared to just

14 unilaterally. In the process, 215 ISIS operatives were detained and 466 killed. Notably, CENTCOM's use of the terms "partnered" and "unilateral" does not necessarily mean that all operations labeled as unilateral were conducted without some level of partner support.

Several of the 2022 operations specifically targeted ISIS leadership, including:

- A **February 3 unilateral raid** (<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2922796/leader-of-isis-dead-following-us-raid-in-syria/>) that killed Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi (aka Haji Abdullah), the group's second "caliph" and most senior leader.
- A **June 16 coalition raid** (<https://www.inherentresolve.mil/NEWSROOM/News-Articles/Stories-Display/Article/3065554/officials-identify-detained-senior-isis-leader/>) that captured Hani Ahmed al-Kurdi (aka Salim), an experienced bomb maker, operational facilitator, and top ISIS leader in Syria.
- A **July 12 unilateral drone strike** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3089938/strike-conducted-in-syria/>) that killed ISIS official Maher al-Agal (known for developing networks outside Iraq and Syria) and injured another senior official.

October saw multiple operations against the group's leadership. An **October 5 U.S. raid** (<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1578094573196222464>) killed senior official Rakkan Wahid al-Shammri and led to the arrest of two of his associates. The next day, **another U.S. operation** (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/06/politics/us-isis-raid-syria/index.html>) killed Abu Hashum al-Umawi (aka Abu Ala, the group's deputy governor in Syria) and Abu Muad al-Qahtani (responsible for prisoner affairs). Later that month, the Free Syrian Army **killed the group's leader** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3232259/death-of-isis-leader/>) and third "caliph," Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, in Deraa province.

CENTCOM further increased the pace of such operations at year's end, conducting **one unilateral helicopter raid** (<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1601947521500483589>) against ISIS leadership on December 11 and **three more** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3250937/uscentcom-conducts-three-raids-in-eastern-syria/>) later that month. It also carried out **six partnered operations** (<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1603649066461978624>) with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) over the week of December 8-16, killing two ISIS officials and arresting eleven others. Interestingly, CENTCOM has not provided any public information on the six other unilateral operations in Syria that were acknowledged in the 2022 year-end statement.

"ISIS at Large" in 2023

From January through March of this year, thirty-four of CENTCOM's operations against ISIS in Syria were carried out with partners and just two unilaterally. These efforts resulted in the deaths of 9 ISIS operatives and the capture of 210.

In April, however, CENTCOM has carried out three unilateral operations. An **April 3 strike** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3350738/strike-kills-isis-leader-in-syria/>) in Syria killed Khalid Aydd Ahmad al-Jabouri, who was reportedly responsible for "planning ISIS attacks into Europe" and developing the group's leadership structure. On April 8, CENTCOM confirmed a **helicopter raid** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3360141/centcom-forces-capture-isis-operative-in-helicopter-raid/>) in eastern Syria that captured "ISIS attack facilitator" Hodayfah al-Yemeni and two of his associates. And on April 17, **CENTCOM confirmed** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3365217/centcom-confirms-isis-senior-leader-killed-in-a-helicopter-raid-in-northern-syr/>) that a helicopter raid in northern Syria had killed three figures, including Abd al-Hadi Mahmoud al-Haji Ali, an "ISIS leader and operational planner responsible for planning terror attacks in the Middle East and Europe."

The partnered operations conducted this year with the SDF and the coalition have included the following:

- A **February 18 helicopter raid** (<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1627072236460072973>) in eastern Syria that captured an ISIS official named Batar, who was involved in planning attacks on SDF-guarded detention centers and

manufacturing improvised explosive devices.

- A **February 17 helicopter raid** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3301701/isis-senior-leader-killed-and-four-us-servicemembers-wounded-in-helicopter-raid/>) near Deir al-Zour that killed Hamza al-Homsi, a senior ISIS leader who oversaw the group's network in eastern Syria.
- A **February 10 operation** (<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1625848630178615296>) that killed Ibrahim al-Qahtani, associated with planning ISIS attacks on detention centers.
- A **January 21 helicopter raid and ground assault** (<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1617256558072676353>) that captured three figures: ISIS facilitator Abdallah Hamid Muslih al-Maddad (aka Abu Hamza al-Suri), ISIS facilitator and logistician Husam Hamid al-Muslih al-Maddad al-Khayr, and an unnamed associate.
- A **January 18 helicopter raid** (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3272227/centcom-conducts-a-partnered-d-isis-operation-with-the-syrian-democratic-forces/>) in an unspecified location that led to the capture of an ISIS media and security operative involved in planning and facilitating operations and recruitment in the region and abroad.

Things to Keep an Eye On

Despite the U.S. shift to “advise, assist, and enable” in Syria, CENTCOM has continued unilateral operations against ISIS leadership figures alongside partnered operations. Numerous factors could help explain the U.S. decision to keep mixing unilateral actions into its strategy. CJTF-OIR commander Maj. Gen. Matthew McFarlane **recently commented** (<https://www.state.gov/special-online-briefing-with-major-general-matthew-mcfarlane-commander-combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-and-dana-stroul-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-defense>) on this complex picture: “We continue to conduct operations supporting our partners that do wide-area security operations and also precision operations to remove ISIS leaders both in Syria and Iraq...ISIS is continually trying to rebuild leadership based on the coalition effectively disrupting senior leaders...Right now they're militarily ineffective. And I think that's [due to] the effectiveness of the coalition, our partners specifically, as they conduct operations to maintain pressure on the network.” Indeed, ISIS actions and coalition counter-operations over the past year show that the group has not been fully defeated, and that the U.S. presence is still very much needed—and still **welcomed** (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-prime-minister-supports-indefinite-u-s-troop-presence-11673785302>) for the time being.

Another important takeaway is that several of the ISIS leaders recently targeted by unilateral U.S. operations were accused of planning terrorist attacks in the Middle East and Europe. CENTCOM's decision to act against these individuals may indicate that the threat they posed needed to be dealt with immediately. It may also signal that ISIS is reprioritizing external operations, which it has not had the capacity to do for some time. Relatedly, the affiliate group Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) **has reportedly been using Afghanistan** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/22/afghanistan-terrorism-leaked-documents/>) as a “significant coordination site” for potential ISIS attacks “across Europe and Asia.” Researchers have **found evidence** (https://www.rienner.com/title/The_Islamic_State_in_Afghanistan_and_Pakistan_Strategic_Alliances_and_Rivalries) that ISKP and ISIS have coordinated closely in the past, even planning external operations together. Although their future operational links remain ambiguous—especially given the ongoing targeting of ISIS leadership figures—both groups are seemingly looking to conduct attacks outside their main bases of operations.

CENTCOM should also carefully weigh its decision to publish the names and responsibilities of ISIS leaders it targets. On one hand, doing so helps publicly demonstrate America's ability to disrupt and disorganize the group's regional activities (at least temporarily), sending a clear message to ISIS supporters that the U.S. mission is far from over. On the other hand, naming leaders could have the opposite effect by elevating obscure individuals into the public imagination and giving them an air of charisma. This is especially true if an ISIS leader is captured alive rather than killed.

In any case, as the United States continues to disrupt “ISIS at large” in Syria, it is important to keep tracking these efforts. This means looking at the nature of U.S. operations (including whether they are unilateral or partnered) and assessing what

they reveal about the focus of U.S. attention.

Devorah Margolin is the Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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