US claims assassination of ISIS leader in Syria

Bill Van Auken
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President Joe Biden delivered a statement from the White House Thursday celebrating what the Pentagon described as a "successful" assassination mission carried out against the purported leader of the Islamic State (ISIS) group in northwestern Syria's Idlib province.

The target of the attack, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, was killed along with at least a dozen others after a helicopter-borne US kill team backed by warplanes laid siege to his home in the town of Atmeh, near Syria's border with Turkey.

Rescue workers told *Al Jazeera* that they pulled 13 bodies from the rubble of the three-story house after the US troops departed. Among the dead, they said, were four women and six children.

There were no US casualties. While a helicopter was lost in the operation, the Pentagon insisted that it was deliberately destroyed after mechanical problems and not brought down by hostile fire.

Biden and the Pentagon had a ready-made alibi for the civilian deaths from their extra-legal assassination raid. They claimed that the alleged ISIS leader had detonated explosives as the US commandos approached. The children had been "human shields," as the Pentagon put it, and all of the casualties were the result of al-Qurayshi's "final act of desperate cowardice," in the words of Biden.

Neighbors, however, reported that the US Special Operations troops had broadcast warnings that anyone who failed to leave the house would die. One told *Al Jazeera* of hearing a "barrage of attacks" at 3 a.m., two hours after the special forces unit had landed.

The raid follows last month's publication by the *New York Times* of previously classified documents showing that US air strikes had killed thousands of civilians in Iraq and Syria during the war against ISIS, with the Pentagon systematically covering up their deaths.

As with previous assassination missions against Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden under President Barack Obama in 2011 and former ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi under President Donald Trump in 2019, Thursday's killing was followed by claims that the operation had made the American people safer. As with these previous episodes, it was treated as an occasion to appeal for national unity and glorify American militarism.

In his speech from the White House, Biden described the US military as "the solid-steel backbone of this nation." He added, "This operation is testament to America's reach and capability to take out terrorist threats no matter where they try to hide anywhere in the world."

Coming in the midst of the feverish campaign for war against Russia, the operation is being used as an example of the capacity to project US military power on a global scale.

As for promoting national unity, this has diminishing returns after a more than two-decade "global war on terror" that has seen the killing of over a million people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and elsewhere, along with the deaths and maiming of thousands of US troops and the expenditure of trillions of dollars by the Pentagon.

Unlike bin Laden and al-Baghdadi, no one had ever heard of al-Qurayshi, and while Biden described him as "this horrible terrorist leader," no US official has linked him to any specific terrorist plot.

There is even less reason than in the deaths of his predecessors to believe that the assassination of al-Qurayshi has any strategic significance or will achieve anything in terms of reducing terrorist threats. In the US, in any case, such threats have come increasingly from a fascistic layer that constitutes a constituency of the Republican Party, with which Biden seeks unity.

The attempts to cast this latest kill mission as a triumph of US intelligence prowess and military daring

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strain credulity. Al-Qurayshi undoubtedly met his fate at the hands of US troops because protection he previously enjoyed had been withdrawn.

The killing took place in an area of Idlib province that is under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the "rebel" front that includes the al-Nusra Front, the former Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, and its allies. Just miles from the Turkish border and home to Syria's largest refugee camp, the area is heavily monitored by the Turkish military, which has 15,000 troops in Idlib, along with Ankara's intelligence agencies.

HTS, with Turkish backing, has tried to rebrand itself as part of the "democratic" opposition to the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and to shed its Al Qaeda legacy and terrorist designations. Al-Qurayshi may well have been offered up to the Americans as part of this effort. To the extent that his whereabouts were communicated earlier to Washington, the White House made a determination that his assassination would be politically useful, no doubt in part to offset the humiliation of the US evacuation from Afghanistan.

The US raid in Idlib comes barely a week after the bloody suppression of an ISIS takeover of a prison in the northeastern city of Hasaka through a combined assault on its gates and an inmate revolt.

Washington's main proxy ground force in Syria, the predominantly Kurdish SDF militia, backed by US troops, armored vehicles and air strikes, retook the prison, leaving nearly 500 dead, including civilians in surrounding neighborhoods. It was the largest US military action since the fall of the last ISIS strongholds in Syria in 2019.

The Syrian government protested the action at the United Nations, aptly accusing Washington of attempting to "recycle" ISIS to justify the illegal occupation of northeastern Syria and its oil fields by some 900 US special forces troops.

Syrian officials have accused both the SDF and US forces of transferring captured ISIS fighters to government-held areas to carry out attacks.

The trajectory of al-Qurayshi himself points to the tangled web linking US imperialism to ISIS, its Frankenstein's monster in the Middle East.

Born in Iraq, al-Qurayshi joined the Sunni Islamist resistance to the US occupation in 2007 and was captured and imprisoned by the Americans in early 2008. He was held at Camp Bucca, where he met al-Baghdadi and where the Islamists were given a free hand to recruit and indoctrinate new adherents.

Al-Qurayshi reportedly was dubbed the "canary caliph" because of his willing collaboration with his American interrogators. Declassified US documents reveal that he fingered at least 68 fellow Iraqi Sunni Islamist militants, including their second-highest leader, who was killed in a US raid. The documents described al-Qurayshi as a "model prisoner."

It is not known when al-Qurayshi was released, but clearly he was someone well known to American intelligence and likely an "asset" of some faction of the CIA or the military.

He joined a faction affiliated with Al Qaeda, which was itself a product of the CIA-orchestrated war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The organization he joined grew thanks to mass hatred of US crimes in Iraq and the deliberate fostering of sectarian divisions as part of Washington's divide-and-rule strategy in the country.

ISIS grew rapidly after moving into Syria to join the US-backed war for regime-change against President Assad, fattening off the arms, money and foreign recruits poured in by the CIA and Washington's regional allies. ISIS became a problem for US imperialism only after it turned back into Iraq in 2014, overrunning a third of the country and routing the US-trained security forces.

The US raid that killed al-Qurayshi is part of stepped-up US military operations in Syria and throughout the Middle East, including the Pentagon's participation in the near-genocidal Saudi-led war against Yemen.

Even as Washington shifts its main focus to preparing war against Russia and China, the oil-rich Middle East remains a key battlefield in US imperialism's increasingly desperate bid to reassert its global hegemony and offset its profound economic and social crisis by military means.

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