

The Killing of Baghdadi: Syrians Recall Terrifying Night of US Raid

Residents in Barisha tell MEE they had no idea the IS leader was hiding in the village until the helicopter raid on Saturday night

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Although it is situated in a war zone, the Syrian village of Barisha is a largely sleepy and picturesque place.

Some 6,000 people live in the village that lies 5km from the Turkish border, and there are also about 1,000 Syrians displaced from Idlib and elsewhere who have pitched their tents in the red earth among olive trees on the village's outskirts.

Syrians in Idlib, the last rebel redoubt, are largely controlled by militant groups and subject to sporadic bombing by the Russian and the Syrian government.

All the mountain village's residents have experienced air strikes first hand, however the ferocious sounds of a US raid on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's hideout on Saturday night shocked them to their core.

"I was sitting with my family [...] at first we heard the sound of helicopters hovering at a very low altitude and then we heard shooting from the ground," Muhammad Mustafa al-Khalil told Middle East Eye.



Inside one of the tents where Syrians, displaced from other parts of the country, are living at Barisha's edge (MEE/Mustafa Dahnon)

"We did not know what was happening. So I hid with my family thinking there were Syrian regime planes targeting our area."

Khalil and his family live in Barisha's outskirts after being displaced from the southern Idlib countryside, and their home was hit by shrapnel.

"I can't describe my family's situation at the time," he said.

"The children were screaming and the women were in horror because we did not know what was happening. The whole area was like an erupting volcano. Luckily, none of my children or family suffered any injuries."

Eight helicopters and a warplane sped into Idlib province at low altitude late on Saturday, eyewitnesses told MEE.

"We were surprised at night by the sounds of approaching aircraft. When I opened the door of my house to see what was there, I was shocked that the aircraft was no more than 15 metres above the ground," Ahmed Mohammed, another Barisha resident, said.

According to Mohammed, Baghdadi's companions started firing at the choppers, which prompted the aircraft to pummel the area they were shooting from, before hitting the roads to cut off access to the house.

General Kenneth McKenzie, the operational leader of the US mission, told reporters on Wednesday that when the Americans landed, militant fighters who were not Islamic State

members, headed to towards the compound, some in a white van shot at by US gunships.

"There were other militant groups in the area that probably did not know he was there," McKenzie said. "Once they saw the helicopters land and begin to operate, they began to flow toward [sic] it...but they were not flowing to reinforce him, they were flowing toward [sic] what they saw."

The fighters may have thought it was a Turkish, Russia or American military operation, he added.

During the same press conference, the US military released [footage of the raid](#) for the first time, with grainy aerial video showing at least 10 US special forces members closing in on the compound from two sides.

"...at the compound, fighters from two locations in the vicinity of the compound began firing on U.S. aircraft participating in the assault."
- Gen Frank McKenzie CDR USCENTCOM pic.twitter.com/SkrthNDs7w

— U.S. Central Command (@CENTCOM) [October 30, 2019](#)

People living in tents close to the house said soldiers told them to stay away and then they heard a voice in Arabic calling on the owner of the house to surrender himself and anyone with him.

Watching the operation unfold from the ground, Mohammed said that after the special forces raided the compound - and after Baghdadi reportedly set off an explosive vest when cornered - a warplane struck the building with three missiles.

"The bombs shattered the windows in all the village's houses," he said.

Once the aircraft had disappeared, Mohammed and other residents rushed to the battleground and saw the house flattened to rubble. There were bodies everywhere, among them women and children.

"I do not know anything about the owner of the house, but I know that he was a civilian who used to sell grain and olives," he said. "I was shocked to learn that the operation targeted the leader of the Islamic State, who was inside."



A day after the raid, residents and journalists walk through rubble where Baghdadi had been hiding
(MEE/Mustafa Dahnon)

Ahmad Saud al-Hussein, who lives in the area after he and his family were displaced from the countryside outside of Hama, said his wife was injured when the compound was bombed.

“The main roads in the area were also bombed. They wanted no one to move while the operation was ongoing,” he told MEE.

Hussein said he had to rush his wife to the nearest hospital under the guise of darkness and feared they would be caught up in the aftermath.

“I heard the voices of foreign soldiers on the ground when I was moving away from my house, which was a great risk [to take] at the time,” he said.

He said he was as surprised as other residents to learn that IS members, let alone high-level figures like Baghdadi, had been dwelling among them in the house at the edge of the village.

Abu Khaled, another displaced Syrian living in a tent close to the house, echoed Hussein.

“What we knew is that it belongs to a civilian who comes out of the house normally and returns to it and that he is a merchant,” he said. “But we didn’t know who was inside the house with him.”

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Featured image: A van which US officials say carried fighters not associated with IS who shot at US special forces, potentially thinking they could also be Turks or Russians (MEE/Mustafa Dahnon)

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