

***‘Following the IS attack on Al-Sina’a prison, the order was given by the upper echelons of the US government to kill Haji Abdullah’***

In the early hours of February 4, 2022, two MH-60M Black Hawks and a MH-47G Chinook of the US Army Special Forces approached a three-story building in the Turkish-backed Islamist-held area of Idlib province, Syria.

The three helicopters were carrying at least 40 soldiers from the US Army's elite Delta Force. Minutes after evacuating civilians from the area, Delta forces entered a building inhabited by the so-called Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi – known as Haji Abdullah – along with several of his entourage.

The US forces, who entered the building to eliminate him, killed one of his lieutenants on the second floor. The death of the IS leader's bodyguard and deputy on the floor below caused Haji Abdullah to detonate a suicide vest on the third floor of the building before the Delta operatives could reach him. The ensuing blast resulted in the deaths of the terrorist leader and several family members, including his wife.

At least eight helicopters, three tanker aircraft, two fighter jets and three unmanned combat air vehicles (UCAVs) from the US Air Force (USAF), US Army Aviation, and a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) flight unit, took part in the operation. The most crucial role was played by six helicopters from the US Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) or 160th SOAR (A) 'Night Stalkers' – see panel on p36.

According to Gen Kenneth F Mckenzie Jr, commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), the US military had been planning this operation for some time. It took months to identify the exact whereabouts of Haji Abdullah, in areas controlled by Turkish-affiliated Islamist militias, using dozens of USAF reconnaissance and armed drones, as well as ground operatives from the CIA.

However, what accelerated the process of this operation was the attack by IS extremists on Al-Sina'a (or Ghuguayran) prison in Hasakah province on January 20, 2022. Late into the night, extremist group members detonated a car bomb near the prison wall and then fired heavy machine guns. Seizing the opportunity, due to the panic and confusion, the imprisoned members of the same group rioted and eventually gained control of dozens of weapons from the prison's arsenal – they also held hostages.

Prisoners from inside and militants from outside managed to kill dozens of prison guards, staff and members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The clashes continued until the next morning, as coalition fighter aircraft were unable to bomb the prison and surrounding buildings, due to the proximity of SDF personnel and civilians.

Eventually, as the weather cleared, two USAF F-16CM Block 50 Fighting Falcons from the 55th Fighter Squadron (FS) 'Fighting Fifty-Fifth' bombed a building near the prison, where IS members were hiding from the SDF.

A total of 18 F-16CMs from the USAF's 55th FS have been deployed to the Middle East since October 20, 2021. They were stationed at Shahid Muwaffaq al-Salti Air Base (AB) near Al-Azraq in Jordan. Two aircraft are on constant patrol over Syria, to provide close air support to friendly forces, 24 hours a day.

On January 21, the SDF recaptured 89 IS members who had escaped from prison. In contrast, IS fighters had taken several SDF members hostage. It was reported that IS members also killed dozens of civilians that day, after they refused to flee their homes in Hasakah, and mutilated their bodies before displaying them in front of their homes.

Clashes continued for another eight days in Hasakah and the surrounding villages, with dozens of IS fighters killed in US airstrikes, as many more were re-arrested. The fighting ended when an ISIL emir (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant leader) named Abu Ubaida, and 20 of his entourage, surrendered to the SDF and returned control of Al-Sina'a prison to them. The incident came minutes after five other IS members were killed by the SDF in a prison yard on January 29, 2022.

At least 136 members of the SDF have been killed in clashes in and around the prison in Hasakah, and many more have been taken hostage, some of whom are still being held captive. According to the SDF, 374 IS members were killed in the clashes, and at least 1,100 prisoners were re-captured, but 400 of the detainees freed by IS are still at large.

# Hunting Haji Abdullah

**Babak Taghvaei** describes the US Army Special Forces' mission to track down and eliminate the so-called Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi

*Right: This surveillance image shows the three-storey building in which IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi was hiding US DoD*

*Left: An MH-47G from the US Army's 160th SOAR (A) 'Night Stalkers' is shadowed by a second Chinook as it receives fuel from an MC-130J Commando II of the USAF's 9th Special Operations Squadron during a night-time training sortie on July 10, 2017*

*USAF/Airman 1st Class Joseph Pick*





## Night Stalkers

The mission to eliminate the leader of the IS terrorist group once again demonstrated the importance of the helicopters operated by the US Army's 160th SOAR (A).

This regiment – known as the 'Night Stalkers' or 'Task Force Brown' – has 2,700 personnel on strength, along with approximately 190 helicopters, split between A/MH-6M Little Birds, MH-60M Black Hawks and MH-47G Chinooks, as well as 12 MQ-1C Gray Eagle UCAVs at its disposal.

The regiment is split between its headquarters at Fort Campbell, Kentucky (1st and 2nd Battalions and a training company); Hunter Army Airfield (AAF), Georgia (3rd Battalion) and Gray AAF, Washington (4th Battalion).

*Above: MH-47G (serial 05-03752) is one of 28 Chinooks operated by the 3rd Company of the 160th SOAR (A), which was deployed to Al-Harir AB for six months in the second half of 2019*  
US Army/Sgt Jacob Jespersen

*Right: Special forces troops board MH-47G Chinook serial 05-03761, prior to departing Al-Harir AB in Iraqi Kurdistan for a mission. This helicopter belongs to the 3rd Company of the 160th SOAR (A) and has been deployed to Iraq twice. It was stationed at Al-Harir in 2018*  
USAF/Airman 1st Class Dwane R Young

*Below: Special forces troops from the US Army's coveted Delta Force conduct fast-rope training from an MH-60M Black Hawk assigned to the 160th SOAR (A). The 'Night Stalkers' operate 56 MH-60Ms in total, with the helicopters split between the regiment's four companies* US Army



The movements of couriers and secret members of IS in and out of the IS leaders' compound had been observed for some time by USAF and CIA drones. Also, their radio and electronic communications had been noted by an RC-135V Rivet Joint electronic intelligence aircraft of the USAF's 38th Reconnaissance Squadron (RS) that had forward deployed to CENTCOM's area of responsibility.

Following the IS attack on Al-Sina'a prison, the order was given by the upper echelons of the US government to kill Haji Abdullah. Subsequently, at the request of CENTCOM, the Joint Special Operations Command of the US Army tasked 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta and the 160th SOAR (A) to conduct the operation.

### An important role

For more than five years, the Joint Special Operations Command had a unit of Delta along with a contingent of the 160th SOAR (A) at the US Army Special Operations Base in Iraqi Kurdistan. The base is located at an airport near the village of Harir, 28 miles northeast of Erbil Airport and 36 miles from the Iranian border.

At the base, the 'Night Stalkers' had ten helicopters permanently stationed there.



*This RC-135W Rivet Joint ELINT/SIGINT aircraft (serial 62-4125) from the USAF's 38th RS monitored IS terrorists in the days leading up to the operation on February 4 USAF/Tech Sgt Christopher Ruano*

These comprised three MH-47G Chinooks and seven MH-60M Black Hawks – the special operations variant of the standard multi-role UH-60M.

Each special operations-configured MH-60M can carry up to nine fully armed troops, while some of the Black Hawks are designated Direct Action Penetrators (DAP) gunships and are armed with an assortment of weapons, including various guns and cannons, Hydra 70 rocket pods, and AGM-114 Hellfire and AIM-92 Stinger missiles.

According to residents, three special operations helicopters, including a Chinook and two Black Hawks, landed near the building where the IS leader was hiding. A similar number of these helicopters were held in reserve in the areas close by, to quickly board the Special Forces, and their crew, and evacuate them to their bases, in the event of an accident befalling the main helicopters.

In addition to six helicopters from the 160th SOAR (A), residents have reported (on social media) the presence of at least two US

***'In response to al-Sham members firing on special operations helicopters, the US Army Apache Guardian gunships opened fire on them, killing several militants'***



## Aircraft involved in the February 4 operation

Operator	Unit	Type	Role	Base	Notes
US Army	160th SOAR (A)	MH-47G (x2)	Special operations	Ain Al-Asad, Iraq	One remained on standby at Al-Shaddadi
US Army	160th SOAR (A)	MH-60M (x4*)	Special operations	Ain Al-Asad	Two remained on standby at Al-Shaddadi
US Army	160th SOAR (A)	MQ-1C (x1)	Surveillance/close air support	Ain Al-Asad	
US Army	Unknown	AH-64E (x2)	Close air support	Al-Shaddadi, Iraq	
USAF	Unknown	MC-130J (x2)	Refuelling support	Ain Al-Asad	
USAF	72nd ARS	KC-135R (x1)	Refuelling support	Al Udeid, Qatar	
USAF	55th FS	F-16CM (x2)	Close air support	Shahid Muwaffaq al-Salti, Jordan	
USAF	Unknown	MQ-9A (x1)	Surveillance/close air support	Ain Al-Asad	
USAF	Unknown	HH-60G (x4)	Combat search and rescue	Ain Al-Asad	Remained on standby at Ain Al-Asad AB
USAF	79th RQS	HC-130J (x2**)	Refuelling support for HH-60Gs	Ain Al-Asad	Remained on standby at Ain Al-Asad AB
CIA	Unknown	MQ-1C (x1)	Surveillance	Ain Al-Asad	

**Additional notes:** \* MH-60M Black Hawk serial 11-20372 was lost during the operation. \*\* HC-130J Combat King IIs serials 09-5709 and 10-5716 were delivered to the 26th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron (ERS) on January 25, 2022, for this operation

Army-operated AH-64E Apache Guardians in the operation. The attack helicopters – which were equipped with a 30mm M230 cannon mounted under the nose, plus a mix of 2.75in Hydra rockets, AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, and external fuel tanks – provided air support for the Delta forces participating in the operation.

At the time of the operation, at least three UCAVs, including an MQ-1C Gray Eagle of 160th SOAR (A) and two USAF MQ-9A Reapers, were flying over the area of operation – which was observed via websites monitoring air traffic.

During the operation, the al-Qaeda-linked Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham fired on US troops and their helicopters. One of the unit's MH-60Ms suffered battle damage, sustained from offensive fire from the Islamists, forcing the helicopter to make an emergency landing near the area of operation. It was then destroyed, to deny the wreckage to the hostile forces.

In response to al-Sham members firing on special operations helicopters, the US Army Apache Guardian gunships opened fire on them, killing several militants.

## Long distance house call

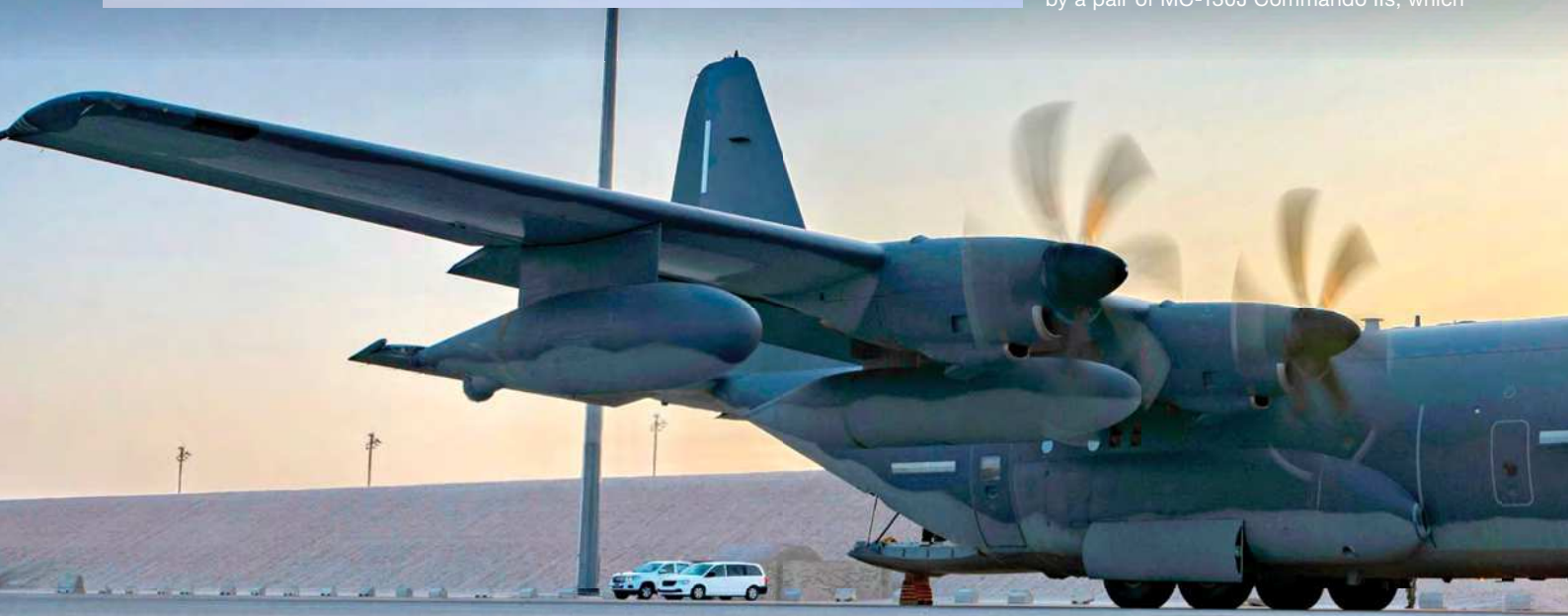
During the operation on February 4, Haji Abdullah was housed in a three-storey building northwest of the village of Atma in Syria's Idlib province. The building was less than a mile from the Turkish border, while its direct distance to the US Harir base in Iraqi Kurdistan was 426 miles. However, as the 'Night Stalkers' had to avoid flying over built-up areas, the distance they would have to travel would balloon to 559 miles – an insurmountable distance, due to fuel limitations.

That being the case, the 'Night Stalkers' were deployed from Harir to Ain Al-Asad AB, in western Iraq, to take part in the operation, as the latter was just 366 miles away from Haji Abdullah's residence in Idlib. However, taking into account the villages and towns en route, the total distance would be 406 miles, but this was still within reach, with a little help.

As the maximum ranges of the Chinook and Black Hawk is 348 miles and 317 miles, respectively, they had to be refuelled in flight by a pair of MC-130J Commando IIs, which



While they were not used in the February 4 operation, the 160th SOAR (A) also operates a 44-strong fleet of A/MH-6M Little Bird light attack/observation helicopters  
US Army





**‘Although one of the MH-60M Black Hawk helicopters (serial 11-20372) was lost during the operation, no special forces personnel were wounded or injured during the mission’**

**Above:** This MH-60M Black Hawk (serial 10-20270) from the 4th Company of the 160th SOAR (A) receives fuel from an MC-130J during a training flight under Exercise Talisman Sabre on August 2, 2021 USAF/1st Lt Joshua Thompson  
**Below:** An MH-60M Black Hawk from the 160th SOAR (A) is refuelled by a USAF-operated MC-130J during a night-time training sortie on July 10, 2017. The MH-60M variant of the venerable Black Hawk family is configured for special operations use USAF/Airman 1st Class Joseph Pick



were also stationed at Ain Al-Asad AB. The MC-130Js were also used for refuelling during the helicopters’ return flight to Ain Al-Asad.

As the six special operations helicopters made their way to Idlib, the two AH-64E Apache Guardians flew from Al-Shaddadi, south of Hasakah. Due to the 225 miles between Atma village and Al-Shaddadi, they had to be configured with external fuel tanks, to provide an acceptable loiter time.

A USAF KC-135R Stratotanker was also present over Iraq to provide air refuelling to the fixed-wing assets involved in the raid, including the F-16Cs and MC-130Js, as well as the RC-135V/W.

Before the flights, the Turkish and Russian governments had been notified of the presence of US fighter jets and helicopters in the area, to prevent any intervention or confusion with those nations.

### The aftermath

After Delta Force proceeded to the second floor of the building in Atma, Haji Abdullah

detonated his suicide vest, killing at least one of his wives and three children. Three other wives and several children were also killed during the operation.

Delta forces later found the dismembered body of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi outside the building and used fingerprints and DNA tests to identify him as the IS leader. Troops then left the area, taking with them computers and documents recovered from Haji Abdullah’s residence, as well as fragments of his body, using a Chinook helicopter and two Black Hawks.

Although one of the MH-60M Black Hawk helicopters (serial 11-20372) was lost during the operation, no special forces personnel were wounded or injured during the mission. A result that is testament to the high level of professionalism and readiness displayed by both the US Army’s Delta Force and 160th SOAR (A). **AFM**

To read more about the aviation side of Special Operations Forces, see *Who dares fly them?* on p86-91.



**Above:** One of the 18 F-16CM Block 50 Fighting Falcons of the USAF’s 55th FS ‘Fighting Fifty-Fifth’ on deployment at Shahid Muwaffaq al-Salti AB near Al-Azraq in Jordan. The aircraft protected the Delta Force troops and 160th SOAR (A) helicopters and their crews during the operation to eliminate the IS leader on February 4, 2022 USAF/Tech Sgt Lauren M Snyder

**Left:** In the case of any accident or incident involving the helicopters from the 160th SOAR (A) during the February 4 operation, four USAF-operated HH-60G Pave Hawk combat search-and-rescue helicopters deployed at Ain Al-Asad AB in western Iraq, supported by two HC-130J Combat King IIs of the 79th Rescue Squadron, would act quickly to rescue the occupants of the downed rotorcraft USAF/Senior Airman Daniel Hernandez

