



Four years after Islamic State overran Iraqi soldiers in Mosul, the group has been routed and their territory shrunk. Iraq arrested five senior ISIS members Wednesday.

## Iraq arrests 5 senior ISIS officials with U.S. help

BY TAMER EL-GHOBASHY AND MUSTAFA SALIM  
The Washington Post

BAGHDAD — Iraq has arrested five senior members of the Islamic State, including a top aide to the militant group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in an operation that involved U.S. and Turkish intelligence support, authorities here said.

The capture of the men, two Syrians and three Iraqis, represents a breakthrough in the hunt for al-Baghdadi, experts said Thursday, and underscores the deep security cooperation within the American-led coalition against the Islamic State despite massive political tensions that are roiling the region.

One of the men, Ismail al-Ithawi, who goes by the alias Abu Zaid al-Iraqi, is considered part of al-Baghdadi's inner circle and was responsible for financial, religious and security port-

folios across the group's territory in Iraq and Syria, said Hisham al-Hashimi, an expert on Islamic State who advises the Iraqi government.

"This is the operation that broke the skull of the Islamic State. Other operations were just breaking bones," said Hashimi, who is regularly briefed by Iraqi intelligence officials.

"Soon, Baghdadi will be killed or captured," he said.

Iraqi and U.S. officials have long said that they believe al-Baghdadi is hiding in the last area in Syria that the Islamic State controls, close to the border with Iraq.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said Thursday that the information gleaned from Ithawi had led to two Iraqi airstrikes on Islamic State targets in Syria.

Hashimi said Ithawi also provided banking information to Iraqi and American interrogators that has helped cut off valuable

sources of funding for the Islamic State, which is also known as ISIS.

The arrests were announced on Iraqi state television late Wednesday and later detailed by the New York Times.

Early Thursday, President Donald Trump touted the detentions in a tweet, saying: "Five Most Wanted leaders of ISIS just captured!"

The spokesman for the anti-Islamic State coalition, Army Col. Ryan Dillon, said in a Twitter post that the arrests were a "significant" blow to the group and underscore the level of cooperation between two U.S. allies in the fight against the Islamic State: the Iraqi security forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces.

The breakthrough came in February, according to Hashimi, when Turkish officers arrested Ithawi in Turkey using information provided by Iraq intelligence.

He was then extradited to Iraq, where he faced interrogation by Iraqis and Americans.



Al-Baghdadi



PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVIS/AP

Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, chief of Africa Command, center, Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Karem, left, and Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier, brief reporters at the Pentagon.

## U.S. military suspends direct combat missions in Africa

BY DAVID S. CLOUD  
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — U.S. special operations troops in Africa have been restricted from undertaking missions that might involve direct combat, one of several steps announced Thursday to prevent future casualties after an October ambush in Niger killed four American soldiers.

U.S. forces have not conducted any operations to kill or capture militants since the deadly firefight and are focused almost exclusively on training Nigerien troops and other U.S. allies in the region, and expanding an airfield outside Niger's capital for drone operations, commanders told reporters at a Pentagon news conference on the results of the military investigation into the Niger attack.

"We are now far more prudent in our missions," said Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, the commander of U.S. Africa Command, which oversees military operations on the continent. "U.S. forces are not to be involved in direct combat."

The new restrictions are perhaps the most far-reaching consequence of the seven-month investigation into the ferocious Oct. 4 ambush of the dozen

American soldiers and more than 30 Nigeriens who battled for their lives during a firefight lasting more than an hour against about 100 militants 20 miles south of the Mali border.

The attack caused a public relations furor for the White House last October after President Donald Trump took several days to reach out to the soldiers' families and then was accused of making insensitive remarks to Staff Sgt. LaDavid Johnson's widow. A congresswoman from Florida said she overheard his remarks. The White House denied the president's effort to console the widow was inappropriate.

Johnson was initially unaccounted for and his body wasn't found until after a two-day search, and then only by villagers. The search for Johnson was delayed, the report noted, after the U.S. received inaccurate reports that he was being held prisoner in a village north of the ambush site.

The Pentagon released an eight-page summary of the investigation Thursday, but withheld the entire 6,300-page report containing witness statements, photographs and other evidence, saying it was still seeking to have the material declassified.

It also made public por-

tions of a 21-minute video that seeks to reconstruct the more than hour-long attack. The full video was shown to Congress, but the Pentagon had decided against releasing it in its entirety to avoid making public "too much information," Waldhauser said.

The investigation blamed "individual, organizational, and institutional failures and deficiencies that contributed to the tragic events of 4 October 2017" according to the summary. But it said that "no single failure or deficiency was the sole reason."

Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier Jr., the investigating officer, noted that "American and Nigerien soldiers fought courageously — despite being significantly outnumbered by the enemy," according to the report.

The investigation criticizes two Army captains — one in charge of the 12-man unit targeted in the ambush and another at the unit's Niger base — for not disclosing to superiors before they headed out that they were conducting a potentially dangerous kill-or-capture mission against Doundou Cheffou, the leader of an Islamic State affiliate involved in seizing an American aid worker.

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