

# Read U.S. Central Command's Investigation Into Botched Aug. 29, 2021 Kabul Drone Strike

Jan. 6, 2023

The investigation was completed a week and a half after the strike and was never released, but The New York Times obtained 66 partially redacted pages of it through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against Central Command. The Pentagon would later acknowledge that the strike was a “tragic mistake” that killed 10 civilians.

Download the original document (pdf)

~~CONTROLLED~~ UNCLASSIFIED INFORMATION

## Exhibit List

1. ~~(S//REL TO USA, FVEY)~~ Post-Strike Snips
2. ~~(S//REL)~~ Preliminary Post-Strike (Prelim Post-Strike Email)
3. ~~(S//REL)~~ ISIS-K HPA Disruption Story Board (J2 product)
4. ~~(S//REL)~~ Initial 5Ws of KS 29 1223Z AUG 21 (b)(1)1.4a Kabul (5Ws)
5. ~~(S//REL)~~ (b)(1)1.4(a) FFIR #9 (Any CF Engagement) KABUL DT KABUL PV 29 1223Z AUG 21 (FFIR)
6. (U) CENTCOM CIVCAS Statement (CENTCOM PAO statement)
7. ~~(S//REL)~~ Initial Final Report, (b)(1)1.4(a) HQ CCIR #7 Potential CIVCAS (S/C CCIR)
8. ~~(S//REL)~~ Intel Post-Strike Assessment
9. ~~(S//REL)~~ DA Form 2823 - Sworn Statement (b)(1)1.4(a)
10. ~~(S//REL)~~ DA Form 2823 - Sworn Statement - (b)(6)
11. ~~(S//REL)~~ DA Form 2823 - Sworn Statement - (b)(6)
12. ~~(S//REL)~~ (b)(1)1.4(a) (mIRC log from 29 Aug 2021)
13. ~~(S//REL)~~ 2 Videos (b)(1)1.4(a)
14. ~~(S//REL)~~ DA Form 2823 - Sworn Statement - (b)(6)
15. ~~(S//REL)~~ 29 AUG strike - Sworn Statement - (b)(6)
16. ~~(S//REL)~~ DA Form 2823 - Sworn Statement (b)(6)

- 16. (S//REL) DA Form 2823 - Sworn Statement - (b)(6)
- 17. (S//REL) DA Form 2823 - Sworn Statement - (b)(6)

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(b)(1)1.4a

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(b)(1)1.4a

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(b)(1)1.4(a)

(b)(1)1.4(a)

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d. (S//REL) The vehicle and driver were assessed with high confidence to be part of the ISIS-K cell and in the final stages of executing an imminent attack at HKIA. Based on the (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(a) reporting, positive identification (PID) of a vehicle fitting the attack cell's description, and suspicious activity with known ISIS-K facilities, the (b)(1)1.4(a) Commander was reasonably certain this was directly part of the ISIS-K cell that was preparing to attack HKIA on 29 August.

e. (S//REL) (b)(1)1.4(a) employed all feasible tactics, techniques, procedures (TTPs) and precautions while conducting an engagement against a vehicle posing an imminent threat to the U.S. Forces securing HKIA. (b)(1)1.4(a) took the appropriate steps to avoid or minimize collateral damage prior to weapons release. The targeted vehicle was tracked for eight hours across the city, and no civilians were detected within the confines of the compound prior to or following weapons release and impact. There were two adult males identified as part of the ISIS-K cell next to the vehicle. Based on intel known to the (b)(1)1.4(a) Commander, they posed an imminent threat to U.S. Forces. Upon multiple post-strike reviews of the DoD and Partner (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(a) at least six non-combatants are in the partially covered courtyard who were not detected prior to the engagement of the hostile forces.

## 2. (U) Background.

a. (S//REL) The U.S. military mission withdrew from the Embassy Southern Compound to HKIA on the night of 15 August due to direct pressure from the Taliban who took over the city of Kabul. The Taliban offensive swept through Afghanistan rapidly, collapsing the government in less than 24 hours. U.S. Officials and Commanders sought to protect forces and withdraw to HKIA to complete the evacuation process. After thousands of Afghans breached the South Gate on 16-17 August, HKIA remained closed and evacuation flights were denied, causing several days of panic for civilians. Large crowds gathered at the entry control points around all of HKIA (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) assessed as many as 20,000 people attempting to get into HKIA at any given time. The mass of people attempting to enter the airport created a vulnerable target for ISIS-K.

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(b)(1)1.4(a)

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senior-level ISIS-K high profile attack (HPA) planners who were directly responsible for the 26 August attack intended to conduct a follow-on complex attack at HKIA on 29 August. In response to the threat reporting, USFOR-A FWD, USEK, and 82d Airborne Division HQ closed all the gates at 0400D on 29 August to mitigate the threat.

### 3. (U) Strike Actions.

(1) ~~(S//REL)~~ Pre-Strike. The ISIS-K cell that conducted the suicide attack on 26 August against the Abbey Gate at HKIA was simultaneously deploying personnel to conduct additional rocket and suicide attacks against U.S. Forces and civilians. (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) confirmed the same cell had obtained suicide bombers, two vehicles (white Toyota Corolla and motorcycle), explosives, media support and planned to execute the attack against HKIA on 29 August (TOP SECRET Addendum). In response, USFOR-A FWD, USEK, and 82d Division HQ closed all gates at HKIA at 0400D on 29 August, while also directing the crowds to disperse. While U.S. Forces and USEK attempted to clear the crowds around HKIA, (b)(1)1.4(a) received (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) confirming the same ISIS-K cell had established a base of operations at a location six kilometers to the west of HKIA. ISIS-K used the neighborhood as a staging area for suicide bombers and previous rocket attack against the airport in December 2020. Subsequently ISIS-K used the

(b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g)

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(b)(1)1.4(a)

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(b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(c)

(d) ~~(S//REL)~~ Pattern of Life (PoL). Screeners and (b)(1)1.4(a) assessed one adult male internal to the observed compound and one male inside the Toyota Corolla. The vehicle was under consistent observation for approximately eight hours. There were no civilians observed by (b)(1)1.4(a) or the Joint Intelligence Brigade (JIB) screeners in the immediate collateral hazard area for the strike at the time it conducted. At the time of the strike, screeners informed the Commander (b)(1)1.4(a) that one adult male was present inside the compound wall, and one adult male was driving the vehicle.

(e) ~~(S//REL)~~ Collateral Damage Estimate (CDE). For this kinetic strike (b)(1)1.4(a) (b)(1)1.4(a) Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTAC) and Intelligence Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Controller (ITC) arrived at a 3m Collateral Effects Radius solution for the selected Hellfire missile. (b)(1)1.4(a) minimize the collateral effects of the warhead striking the target. This weaponeering solution was optimal for weapons effects inside the vehicle and for limiting collateral concerns in the courtyard. The (b)(1)1.4(g) Hellfire missile would detonate beneath the sedan's roof surface and before exiting the floor, thus killing the occupant and destroying the vehicle (b)(1)1.4(a) chose this option over a point detonation because collateral effects to personnel was a main concern. Collateral damage was the main

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(b)(1)1.4(a)

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b. ~~(CUH)~~ The (b)(1)1.4(a) Chief of Staff and (b)(1)1.4(a) J2 independently reviewed all intelligence leading to the positive identification, categories, (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(a) (including partner feeds) and actions taken by the strike cell and partnered forces. These interviews, document and feed reviews all contributed to this report. There is a TOP SECRET digital addendum that can be requested through the (b)(1)1.4(a) Staff Judge Advocate

(b)(6)

c. ~~(S//REL)~~ Secondary Explosions. Moments after the munition struck and detonated at the rear of the white sedan, a large explosion engulfed the video frame. The explosion was quickly replaced by a large burning flame. Conflicting opinions from experts regarding the secondary explosion makes it inconclusive regarding the source of the large flame seen after the strike. The GEOINT Exploitation Team (GET), the Processing Exploitation and Dissemination (PED) cell, and three Explosive Ordinance Disposal personnel independently viewed the strike video and assessed that some form of an accelerant ignited from within the vehicle.

(b)(1)1.4(a)

(GET Comment) The Imagery Analyst noted that it is very rare to see a car explode when it catches fire. For this to happen, it needs the perfect proportion of oxygen, gas, and fire. Cars run on liquid gas which will typically not explode when set on fire. Cars are engineered such that, in the event of a worst-case scenario they burn, not explode. Once the munition hits the white sedan, a large explosion was observed one second after initial impact in which the GET assessed as possible accelerants that were not organic to the vehicle.

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(b)(1)1.4(a)

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(b)(1)1.4(a)

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d. ~~(S//REL)~~ Contributing factors. (b)(1)1.4(a) Commander and the GFC were postured to assess the dynamic relationship between risk to force, the value of the target, and the clarity of intelligence about the nature of this ISIS-K target. Threat conditions remained extremely high to U.S. forces at HKIA. Intelligence indicated that an attack on U.S. forces was imminent. Risk of failure to prevent an imminent attack weighed heavily in the (b)(1)1.4(a) and GFC's decisions. Therefore, I find the strike met reasonable certainty that the ISIS-K operative, driving a white Toyota Corolla, was prepared to participate in an attack on U.S. Forces at HKIA. Proportionality considerations also weighed in favor of taking the strike. The (b)(1)1.4(a) Commander and the GFC achieved reasonable certainty for the strike and attempted to mitigate all blast effects from the weapon solution within the walls of the compound.

e. ~~(CUH)~~ I find no negligence on the part of any individual involved in the strike process. Although CIVCAS did occur, the circumstances leading to the loss were reasonably unavoidable given the circumstances. Therefore, I do not believe there are any actions for which any individual could be held liable.

f. ~~(S//REL)~~ I also find that at the time of the strike, intelligence supported finding reasonable certainty that the individual driving the white Toyota Corolla at the compound location (b)(1)1.4(a) was an ISIS-K operative, involved in targeting Afghan and American lives at HKIA.

## 6. Recommendations.

a. ~~(CUH)~~ All aircraft participating in the surveillance of a potential strike target should clearly communicate during operations. Given the high risk nature of this operation, the (b)(1)1.4(a) required real time updates and feedback from each airborne platform. Most importantly, the designation of strike posture indicates a Commander is preparing to strike a target with lethal force. On 29 August, the (b)(1)1.4(a) Commander prepared to strike the white Toyota Corolla and required all (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) to provide a collateral scan on the objective coordination between all (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) including partners, (b)(1)1.4(a) Commander maximum situational awareness about the intended target location. Recommend deliberate confirmation among all (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) prior to the execution of a strike, including an explicit notification that the Commander is directing strike posture.

b. ~~(S//REL)~~ CENTCOM should examine the available evidence to determine the source of the secondary explosion and flame after the strike on the Toyota Corolla. The evidence available at the time of this investigation render an unknown conclusion about

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(b)(1)1.4(a)

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the substance that created such a large flame after the strike. I recommend further investigation by subject matter experts.

c. (~~S//REL~~) Commanders should pause, when operationally feasible, to confirm through ITC and PED that target and collateral are within the strike parameters. Urban terrain presents the greatest risk of collateral effects upon civilians. Commanders must accept prudent risk to mission and forces to achieve reasonable certainty before striking a target. The urban terrain in Kabul presents a high risk category for conducting strike operations. The operational security and techniques of ISIS-K produce doubt and uncertainty for targeting efforts. The high confidence (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) a picture of imminent risk to the U.S. Forces in HKIA, only 1.5 km from the White House, the Corolla. The weaponizing solution and strike location were selected in an effort to minimize collateral damage. A short tactical pause may have increased the chance that an (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) would have seen civilians in the compound area at the (b)(1)1.4(a)

d. (~~S//REL~~) I recommend ensuring one (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) remains on the strike location to collect data on enemy casualties and to gather additional post-strike intelligence. In this engagement, the (b)(1)1.4(a), (b)(1)1.4(g) could confirm post-strike casualties and possibly identify any non-combatants which were inadvertently killed.

7. U. Point of contact for this memorandum is the undersigned at (b)(6)

(b)(3) (10 U.S.C. § 130b), (b)(6)

Encl.  
See exhibit list

(b)(3) (10 U.S.C. § 130b), (b)(6)

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