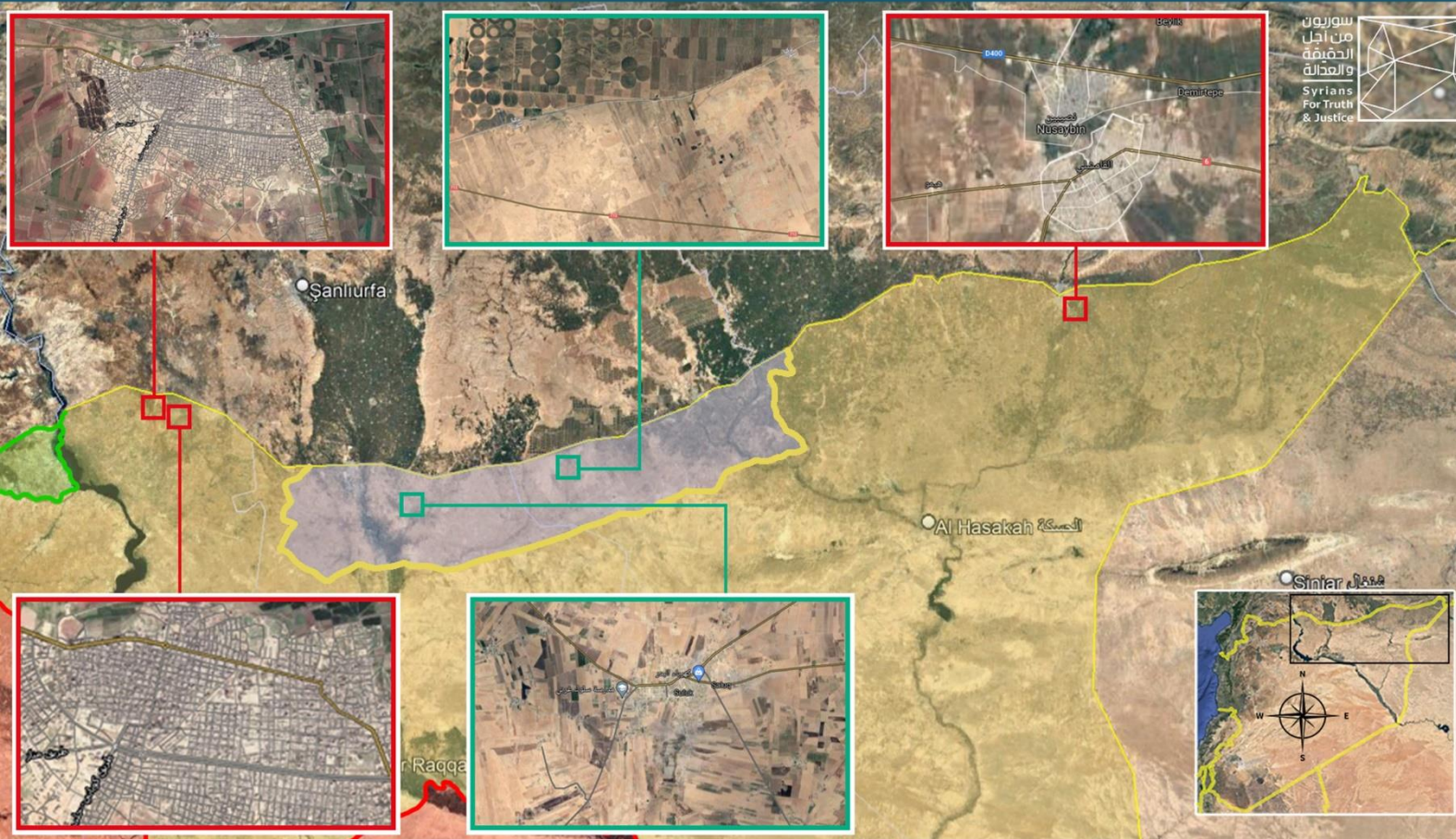


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سوريون
من أجل
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Syria: A Jihadist and an Arms Dealer Killed in Global Coalition Drone Strikes

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Executive Summary

In October 2021, the US-led Global Coalition against Daesh/Islamic State (IS) carried out two drone attacks, killing two key IS-affiliated jihadists. The coalition carried out the first attack on 22 October in Suluk town, in Raqqqa province. The attack killed the jihadist Abu Abdullah al-Raqqawi, whose real name was later identified as Abdulhamid al-Mattar. Al-Raqqawi is a member of the extremist group Hurras al-Din (The Guardians of Religion Organization), which is stationed in the suburbs of Idlib and Latakia and mostly operates in the areas of Jisr al-Shugur and the Turkmen Mountain.

The US-led coalition carried out the second attack on 25 October, targeting the strip in northeastern Syria, which stretches between the two cities of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tal Abyad. The British Royal Air Force [released](#) a statement that a remotely piloted Reaper pursued and carried out the strike “when the individual was alone in a field.” The strip is controlled by the Turkish army and the opposition’s Syrian National Army (SNA). The attack killed Abu Hamza al-Shuhail, a famous arms dealer in the region. In past years, al-Shuhail supplied and sold massive quantities of various types of firearms to several parties in the Syrian conflict, chiefly IS.

In this brief report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) provides a detailed account of the two drone attacks, both of which have been claimed by the US-led coalition. For the purposes of the report, STJ verified the identities of the targets who were killed in the attacks and obtained the names of three other persons who were shot and killed during and after the attack on al-Shuhail.

The report draws on accounts STJ obtained from 10 sources. Additionally, the report presents the findings of STJ’s digital forensic expert on exclusive videos and open sources images covering the attacks.

Notably, the two attacks have been analyzed as a marked change in the US-led coalition’s position on jihadists’ presence in Turkey-held areas and a sign that the Coalition is planning to adopt stricter measures against this presence. This analysis has been based on the fact that the coalition already claimed responsibility for the death of al-Raqqawi and has gained further solidity since the Coalition has recently confirmed that it is the party behind al-Shuhail’s drone assassination.

The two attacks garnered huge attention because they were carried out amidst a flux of information and [reports](#) that evidenced an extensive presence of former IS militants in Turkey-controlled areas and within the ranks of the SNA—an affiliate of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC).

Additionally, the assassinations were linked to a series of Turkish drone attacks that shook northeastern Syria, targeting civilians, staffers within the Autonomous Administration, and fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). On 20 October 2021, the SDF-affiliated Internal Security Forces (Asayish) published a statement claiming that a Turkish drone [targeted the car](#) of Baker Jradeh, the Co-Chair of the Social Justice Council of the Autonomous Administration

in Ayn al-Arab/ Kobanî city. The attack killed two administration staffers and wounded Jraded and two civilians who were nearby.

Three days later, on 23 October, a Turkish drone targeted a car and killed the three passengers inside. Covering the news, Hawar News Agency, which is mostly aligned with the Autonomous Administration, [reported](#) that the attack killed three civilians. However, the next day, on 24 October, the SDF published a [statement](#) saying that the victims were three of their fighters who were in Ayn al-Arab/ Kobanî city for medical treatment.

A third attack was reported on 9 November 2021. In a [statement](#), the Asaysih said that the attack targeted a car in the al-Hilaliya neighborhood in Qamishli/Qamishlo city and killed three civilians from the same family. The statement listed the dead as Youssef Kalou, 82, and his grandsons Mazloun and Muhammad Kalou. The Asayish identified the car as belonging to Raizan Kalou, an SDF civil affairs advisor. The Asayish stressed that Kalou was not in the car at the time of the attack, which killed his civilian grandfather, and his SDF-affiliated brother and maternal cousin.

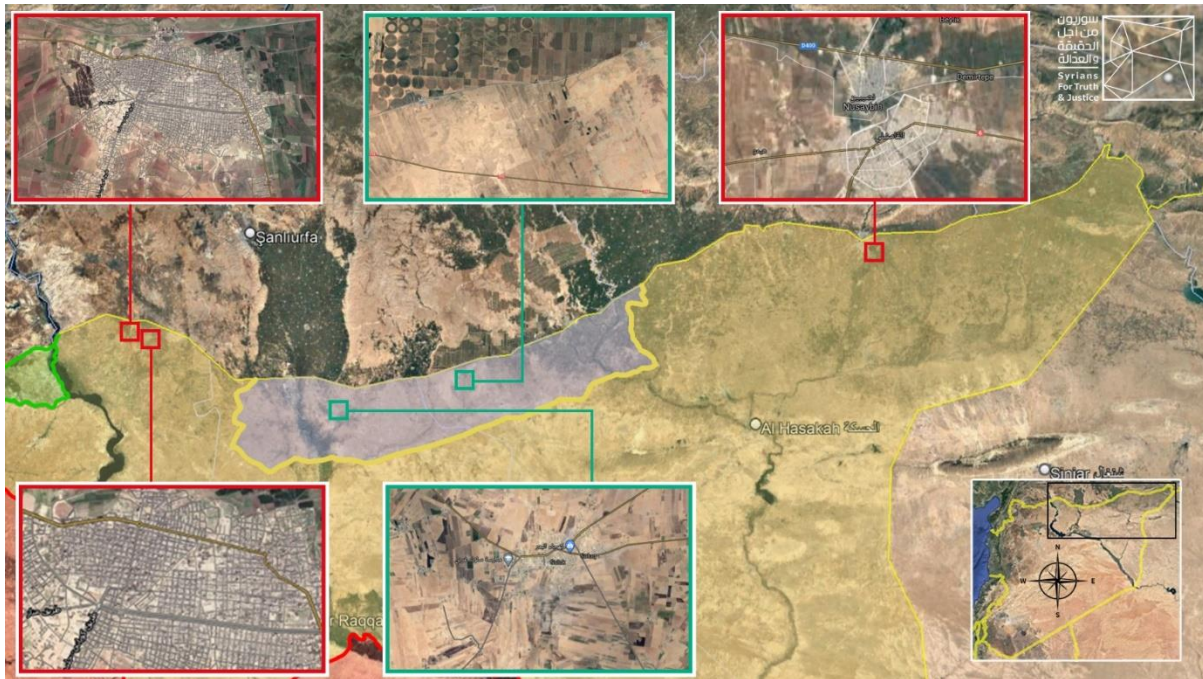


Image 1- Map locating the sites targeted by drone attacks in northeastern Syria in October 2021. The green squares point to the strikes carried out by the U.S.-led coalition in the “Peace Spring Areas”; and the red squares point to the locations where Turkish operations were conducted.

1. Assassination of Abu Hamza al-Shuhail

On 25 October, around 10:00 a.m., a remotely piloted British Royal Air Force [Reaper](#), armed with Hellfire missiles, targeted a person allegedly associated with IS while working as part of the global coalition against IS. The dead target was profiled as a former IS commander by SNA-related media outlets, and described only as allied to IS by [other](#) Syrian outlets.

The drone struck a reportedly newly constructed [farm](#) adjacent to the Syria-Turkey border in [al-Adwaniya village](#), which is administratively affiliated to the [Mabrouka](#) district in the SNA-held Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city. The attack corresponded with a raid by Turkish ground troops. The troops [came from Turkey](#), encircled the target area, exchanged fire, and killed a gunman in the farmhouse, called Abdulrahman Salem al-Hammad. The gunman used to work with al-Shuhail and visited the farmhouse frequently.

The Turkish-land operation which followed the death of al-Shuhail indicates coordination between the US-led coalition and Turkish forces. The coalition is believed to have deployed the drone that killed the target while Turkish forces advanced from the opposite direction of the border, spread, and scanned the area.

In addition to the deaths of al-Shuhail and al-Hammad, STJ obtained information that two other civilians were killed during the assault. The civilian victims arrived in the target area about an hour and a half after the assassination operation started. The victims were identified as Sami al-Khuzami, who died when he was shot in the chest, and Nawaf al-Khalaf, who died when he was shot in the head. Al-Khuzami and al-Khalaf were killed on the main street leading to the farm, about 150 meters away from the farmhouse. Later, locals from the area retrieved all the dead bodies, gathered them near the farm, and then transported them to different places.

After the Turkish forces withdrew from the targeted area, relatives of al-Shuhail and al-Hammad went to the farmhouse and retrieved their bodies. They obtained a permit to relocate the remains of al-Shuhail and his bodyguard al-Hammad and bury them in their hometown al-Shheel, in Deir ez-Zor, which is located within the territories controlled by the SDF and the US-led coalition. The two men were buried on 26 October, according to an exclusive video obtained by STJ, which documented al-Shuhail's funeral ceremony in the town.

The Royal Air Force statement announced that the strike was completed against a "known terrorist"; however, the statement does not give his name. STJ reached out to several sources to investigate al-Shuhail's background and the activities which led to his assassination. The sources confirmed that Sabbahi al-Ibrahim al-Musleh, who operated by the name Abu Hamza al-Shuhail, worked with IS. They added that al-Shuhail was a well-known arms dealer in the region, who, for years, cooperated with the several military sides that successively controlled Deir ez-Zor province since 2011. Al-Shuhail worked with the factions of the former Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front)/Qaeda, and later with both IS and the SDF. Al-Shuhail was smuggled out of the area in coordination with SNA commanders for the Turkey-held Peace Spring strip. Al-Shuhail escaped the area fearing for his life after SDF-affiliated military bodies asked that he help them locate IS cells in the area and find the places where IS hid weapons. Al-Shuhail was approached because he sold IS weapons for many years and was close to them.

The sources added that al-Shuhail resumed working in arms trade when he arrived in the Peace Spring Strip. Additionally, taking advantage of his stay near the Turkish borders, al-

Shuhail engaged in people smuggling, in coordination with SNA commanders. He rented the farmhouse in al-Adwaniya—which is under the military control of SNA-affiliated [20th Division](#)—and made it a headquarters for administrating his business.

Investigating al-Shuhail's death incident, STJ's digital forensic team analyzed online footage circulated about the drone attack, as well as an exclusive video obtained from one of the sources.



Image 2- Two photos taken at different intervals of the farmhouse built sometime in 2021, and where al-Shuhail was killed. The farmhouse is adjacent to Syria-Turkey borders and is farmed in red.

Credits: Planet Labs Inc.



Image 3- Satellite image taken by Planet Labs Inc. 7 November 2021. The photo locates the farmhouse—the black square—where al-Shuhail was killed, compared to the location of the Turkish base—the red square—from where the ground forces raided the farmhouse. Additionally, the photo shows the border wall between Syria and Turkey. Credit: Planet Labs Inc.

In addition to locating the farmhouse, STJ's digital forensic expert [Alexander McKeever](#) analyzed exclusive videos filmed at the place where al-Shuhail was killed. The video shows the place where the two civilians were killed—circled in green—and whose bodies were later taken to the site of the attack, assembled with the bodies of al-Shuhail and his bodyguard. The digital expert linked the screenshots from the video with satellite footage of the same location.



Image 4-Footage from the video, showing the farmhouse, in the black square. Credit: STJ.



Image 5- Satellite image linked with the live footage from the video. Credit: Planet Labs Inc.



Image 6-Footage from the video. Credit: STJ.



Image 7- Satellite image linked with the live footage from the video. Credit: Planet Labs Inc.



Image 8- Footage circulated on social media of what is believed al-Shuhail's body parts and the location where the drone hit.



Image 9- Footage circulated on social media of what is believed to be al-Shuhail's body parts and the location where the drone hit.



Image 10- The footage from social media linked with satellite images. Credit: Planet Labs Inc.



Image 11- Photo of Sabbahi Ibrahim al-Musleh, known as Abu Hamza al-Shuhail, who was killed in a drone attack by the US-led coalition in al-Adwaniya town in rural al-Hasakah on 25 October 2021.
Credit: Activists from the area.

Importantly, al-Shuhail assassination also killed three civilians, who maintained no relations with the arms dealer. In addition to the two civilians killed during the Turkish raid in the farmhouse, a third civilian was killed in clashes between factions following the drone attack.

The Turkish raid lasted for two hours from the start until the location was evacuated. The Turkish forces killed two civilians who lived nearby, while on their way to check on the farmhouse after the drone attack. According to a relative of one of the victims, the two men were intentionally shot by the Turkish forces around 11:45 a.m.

Later the two civilians were identified as Nawaf al-Khalaf, a shepherd, and Sami al-Khuzami, who worked in an agricultural vehicle repair shop. The victims lived in the al-Adwaniya village, near al-Shuhail's farmhouse. Several relatives of the victims said that al-Khuzami rode his motorbike to the attacked area. The bike appears beside al-Shuhail's body parts in one of the photos above. On the way towards the farm, al-Khuzmai encountered al-Khalaf, who joined him there. The two men were shot by Turkish forces spread throughout the area. Additionally, the distance between the locations where the two men were shot and the location where the forces were stationed indicates that they were likely killed by sniper fire.

A relative of al-Khalaf recounted to STJ that he was shot in the head, which apparently killed him on the spot. The relative added that al-Khuzami, who was riding the bike, seated in front of al-Khalaf, was shot in the chest and killed. The families of the victims transported the bodies and buried them in the Hroubi village on the evening of 25 October.



Image 12 - Victim Sami al-Khuzami, who was targeted just in the heart.



Image 13- Victim Sami al-Khuzami before his death.



Image 14 - Victim Nawaf al-Khalaf, shot in the forehead.



Image 15- Victim Nawaf al-Khalaf before his death.

Al-Shuhail's triggered a series of intra-factional clashes. After the attack, the two factions Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) and Jaysh al-Sharqiya (Eastern Army) carried out three attacks against Liwa al-Khattab (al-Khattab Brigade), a faction of fighters that earlier dissented from Ahrar al-Sharqiya and started operating independently. Ahrar al-Sharqiya accused Liwa al-Khattab of providing the coordinates of the al-Shuhail's location to the US-led coalition. These retaliatory attacks prove that al-Shuhail was close to the commanders of the two attacking factions.

The factional clashes took place in the towns of Sharkrak and Suluk/Hammam al-Turkman, as well as near the SNA-held sector of Ain Issa. Turkish forces intervened and stopped the clashes in Suluk/Hammam al-Turkman.

The hostilities between the factions killed one civilian at least, who was later identified as Nabil al-Shehadeh.

2. Assassination of Abu Abdullah al-Raqqawi

On the morning of 22 October 2021, the US-led coalition targeted former Jihadist Abdulhamid al-Matter, known as Abu Abdullah al-Raqqawi, with a drone near his house in SNA-controlled Suluk town. The attack killed al-Raqqawi right away.

On the day of the attack, the United States Department of State claimed responsibility for the attack. The department published a [statement](#), saying that they targeted the jihadist with an MQ-9 drone and that there were no civilian casualties.

Investigating the jihadist's background, STJ obtained information that al-Raqqawi was a former fighter of al-Nusra Front in rural Hama who then joined Hurras al-Din. However, al-Raqqawi was not a renowned high-ranking commander in either of the armed groups. Al-Raqqawi escaped Idlib to the Peace Spring strip after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham imposed several restrictions on Hurras al-Din. He disbanded from Hurras al-Din and headed to the strip, crossing Turkish territories through the help of his connections and acquaintances within SNA command.

To accurately locate the site of the attack, STJ's digital expert linked open-source footage of the attack with satellite images.



Image 16- The body of the former jihadist Abdulhamid al-Mattar, nicknamed Abu Abdullah al-Raqqawi. Credit: Local sources and activists.

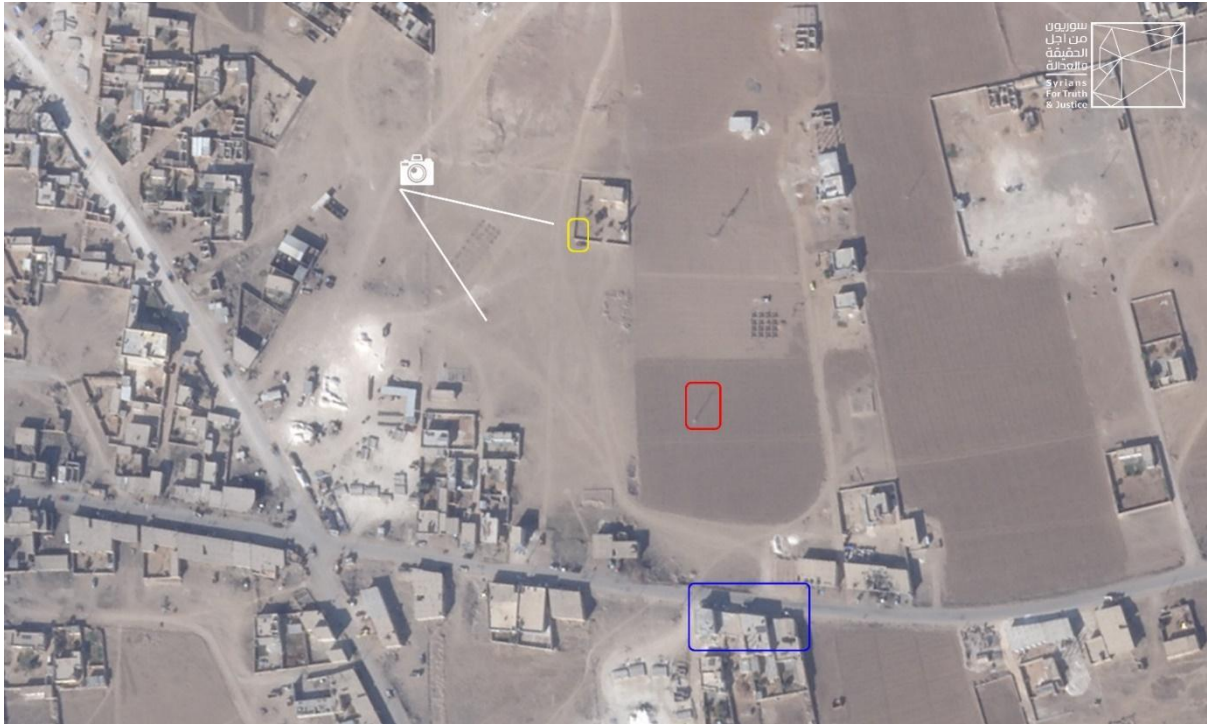
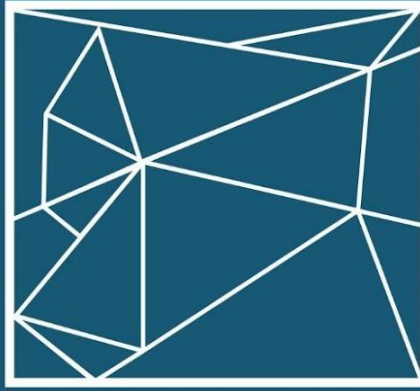


Image 17- The live footage linked with satellite images. Credit: Planet Labs Inc.

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History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.