
NEW- US Military Modifies AI & Lethal Targeting Process After Iran School Strike

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The changes include refining processes for vetting targets and adding open-source data feeds to better track civilian movement.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-09-22/us-military-modifies-ai-combat-targeting-after-iran-minab-school-strike> (and gift link to go beyond the paywall at the end)

By [Katrina Manson](#)

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The US military command responsible for combat operations in the Middle East has made multiple changes to its lethal targeting process and boosted how it uses AI to help vet intelligence following a deadly strike against a school in Minab, Iran, according to US officials and people familiar with the matter.

The changes at US Central Command, which haven't been previously reported, focus on three key areas: refining processes and workflows for refreshing and vetting planned targets, adding new open-source data feeds to better track civilian movement, and making dozens of upgrades to Maven Smart System, the AI-enabled battle-management program made by defense contractor Palantir Technologies Inc., according to the people, who asked not to be named to discuss sensitive matters.

These include new ways for Maven to sort through intelligence to help distinguish the function of a building, one of the people said.

The raft of changes at US Central Command, known as Centcom, highlight the need to reduce the risks of errors in large-scale, high-speed combat operations. Some defense officials and experts have warned privately that the chances of another Minab are still too high.

More than 120 children were killed in a bungled Feb. 28 strike on the school, which was previously part of an Iranian military facility. On that day, the US hit 1,000 targets in a surprise attack, an overwhelming delivery of firepower that Cameron Stanley, head of the Pentagon's digital and artificial intelligence office, said was enabled by Maven Smart System.

In an interview, Stanley said dozens of upgrades to Maven — which is overseen by his office — include adding open-source feeds that can help track the movement of civilian maritime traffic, which became more important as the conflict progressed, he said. "Different types of things were identified, different challenges were identified, new data sources were incorporated," he said.

In addition, Palantir built new capabilities into Maven in the days after the strike including AI agents that re-review underlying intelligence, which have caught new anomalies, Bloomberg previously reported.

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Both Centcom and Palantir declined to comment.

Following an internal review of the school strike, the US commander responsible for the region launched an independent investigation on March 12, according to one of the people familiar with the matter. An initial report was

submitted to Centcom in April, the person said.

A Pentagon spokesperson said the department has nothing to announce about the investigation at this time, and the US has yet to take public responsibility for the strike. [Admiral Bradford Cooper](#), the commander of Centcom, testified before Congress in May that he and his staff assessed the school strike “correlated” with a US attack.

In 2019, an intelligence analyst flagged changes at the site, but they weren’t inputted into the main military intelligence database, called MIDB, that the US relies on to build its target lists and failed to reach military commanders, according to [previous Bloomberg reporting](#).

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A [report](#) commissioned by the United Nations Human Rights Council and released earlier this month said the failure by the US to update targeting databases and verify that the building in Minab was still a military facility “went beyond mere negligence.” The report found “reasonable grounds” to believe US forces committed a war crime. A White House spokesperson [dismissed the report](#), saying the only party that has committed war crimes was the Iranian regime.

A person familiar with the preliminary investigation submitted in April concluded that the information about the school site contained within MIDB was wrong. The information wasn’t updated even though there are indications that say it should have been, the person said.

Cooper, the commander of Centcom, in the spring privately briefed Congress that he wants to do more to prevent incidents of civilian harm, but gave no concrete recommendations at the time and did not address whether the US was responsible for the Minab school strikes, according to a person briefed on the matter.

During public testimony to Congress in May, Cooper said preventing civilian harm was a “particular passion” of his, and he invited members of Congress to visit his headquarters in Tampa, Florida, to see their targeting process after being grilled about the military’s actions in Iran. More than four months later, those visits have yet to take place, according to people familiar with the matter.

Stanley, the Pentagon AI chief, said Maven played a critical role in the US attack on Iran. He described a “massive uptick” in the use of Maven due to Operation Epic Fury, the official name of the military campaign against Iran. By May, there were 50,000 active Maven accounts across the US military, he said. That’s [more than double](#) the number in use the year before.

The upgrades to the system have been a joint effort among Palantir, Centcom and the Maven office that falls under his purview, he said.

The Pentagon has leaned into AI-enabled processes aimed at speeding up the so-called kill chain at a time of rising debate over the use and reliability of AI at war.

A Pentagon official said AI-enabled targeting is a human-directed process that is governed by commander’s intent, strict rules of engagement and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s instruction standards. “The Department of War remains committed to rigorously verifying all intelligence inputs and the responsible integration of emerging technologies to augment service members in making informed and precise operational decisions,” the official said.

Stanley is among those who worry that delivery of intelligence may not be able to keep up with the speed of Maven, despite what he and other supporters say is the system’s promise to help make better decisions faster.

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“Our efforts to accelerate operational decision-making has outpaced several other warfighting functions,” he said. The department is aggressively seeking to solve those gaps, he said, citing underlying military intelligence, logistics and future operational planning among the factors that need to catch up.

He described Maven Smart System as central to Centcom’s ability to hit many targets quickly throughout the major combat operations against Iran, and he lauded the ability of the system to fuse together different data feeds and optimize digital workflows.

“It would have been a struggle” for the US to conduct so many strikes so quickly without Maven, he said, describing more than 13,000 targets hit within 38 days of Operation Epic Fury as “really a revolutionary number.”

Stanley said he couldn't comment directly on the school strike because there's an ongoing investigation and that he's not close enough to it to provide an opinion.

It's not clear how Centcom had set up Maven on the eve of the combat operations, and Stanley said his Pentagon office doesn't control how combatant commands set up Maven for their own individual use.

Specific Maven users, such as Centcom, can tailor Maven to address their individual policies and targeting processes, including to find anomalies — that is, something that might require additional inspection — in underlying data.

Palantir's system "can do a lot of things," he said. "But it has to be optimized and told to do it."

Cooper, the Centcom commander, praised the role of advanced AI tools that Centcom was using in a [video address](#) issued about two weeks after the start of major combat operations against Iran. These advanced AI tools can turn processes that used to take hours and sometimes days into seconds and were helping Centcom sift through vast amounts of data to help humans make decisions faster than the enemy can react, he said.

The new AI tools at Centcom that sit within Maven can help go through vast amounts of underlying — and sometimes contradictory — intelligence to help resolve the true function of any building, according to a defense official briefed on the matter, requesting anonymity to share private details.

Palantir and Maven aren't able to disqualify a target, however, nor correct mistakes in the authoritative military intelligence database that describes the function of buildings and feeds into Maven, according to the defense official.

The new AI tools can nevertheless help resolve potential inconsistencies in the data and the way it is labeled and characterized, according to the defense official, arguing that more and better use of AI throughout the entire pipeline of military intelligence and operations could have helped ensure the school strike didn't happen.

Even so, Stanley indicated there were limits to how much Maven could do. "Maven Smart System cannot be the single source of all decision-making for the entire department," he said. People also need to ask demanding questions about machines and of the data carried in them, including how accurate and up-to-date it is, he said. "What it can do is it can highlight, like I said, anomalies, you know, differences in data feeds, et cetera," Stanley said.

Larry Lewis, an expert on autonomy and AI at the nonprofit organization CNA, which provides research for the US Department of the Navy, argues AI doesn't fix longstanding problems with how intelligence and targeting systems are designed. Lewis, who has reviewed more than 2,500 incidents of civilian harm in US military operations, argued that AI instead inherits these problems.

"Speed and automation just mean the same errors happen faster and at a larger scale," he warned.

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