



Next move The US withdrawal from Syria marks one full turn of the wheel in the region's great game
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STATES OF MATTER

Intrigues in West Asia

Trump may have retrieved political ground after the elimination of al-Baghdadi, but the reality of increasing US incapacity in the region is apparent



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The elimination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, putative Caliph of the Islamic State (IS), advertised as US President Donald Trump's biggest win in the war on terror, may have been an afterthought within the broader evolution of US strategy in the regional theatre.

Just days before, Trump had announced in a move harshly criticised even by allies who have stood loyally by him through a dubious trail of executive actions, that US forces would withdraw from a Kurdish enclave occupied in the early days of the Syrian civil war. The impresario of the deal had struck another, yielding up the Kurdish forces armed and equipped by the US to Turkey's tender mercies.

Always suspicious of US intentions in Syria, which saw the move as a potential trigger for trouble among its own Kurdish minority, Turkey moved in swiftly. Brief and bloody skirmishes with the Kurdish militia were followed by mutual disengagement. Then came an agreement for joint patrols with Russia, the latter functioning to safeguard Syria's territorial integrity while firmly slapping down Kurdish ambitions.

In circumstances that still remain unclear, with a cast of characters that probably included Kurdish allies, US forces then went back in with maximal force, attacking a compound in the north of Syria where al-Baghdadi was believed to be hiding out. As the compound was reduced to rubble, al-Baghdadi, holed up with his family, blew himself up rather than risk live capture.

Trump may have retrieved political ground with his shrinking domestic constituencies, but the reality of US withdrawal from the region is apparent.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the dissolution of its central authority led to an accretion in Iran's strategic clout. That unforeseen consequence of superpower hubris posed the next great strategic challenge the US sought to

beat back in league with its increasingly insecure allies in the region.

With Israel not even seeking to conceal its engagement in the region as before, the US, in league with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, actively pressured Syria into pulling out of Lebanon. Syria complied but left behind Hezbollah as a well-entrenched proxy. The Saudis had a useful puppet in Sunni Muslim Prime Minister Saad Hariri, under the Lebanese system of power-sharing. But nationalist legitimacy seemed vested with Maronite Christian President Michel Aoun and the Shia militia Hezbollah.

Iran's nuclear programme became the next pressure point. And after an effort at regime change in Iran was abandoned in 2009, Syria became the active arena of regional intrigues drawing in a variety of actors with violently irreconcilable agendas. In the bargain, the Saudis were probably more intimately involved in the birthing of the IS than has so far been revealed.

Iraq's first impulse, as the IS swept through its territory, was to condemn Saudi Arabia for its dangerous spawn. Though subdued since then, that narrative was revived in Iran's rather indifferent response to al-Baghdadi's death. It is "no big deal", tweeted the Iranian information minister MJ Azari-Jahromi: "You just killed your creature".

The US withdrawal from Syria marks one full turn of the wheel in the region's great game. Ambitions of toppling the Iran-aligned Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria now seem abandoned as the country is left under the guardianship of Turkey and Russia. US-sponsored alliances, meanwhile, have frayed after a bitter feud between the royal families of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. And the effort to vanquish an Iran-backed militia in Yemen has

floundered with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates picking different sides, triggering a bitter war within a war.

Blowback for the Saudis has been apparent in the growing insecurity of shipping through the Gulf and most dramatically in a series of attacks on its oil facilities in September. Iran's Houthi allies in Yemen claimed the attack, deeply humiliating the Saudis. Efforts since then to pin the blame directly on Iran have got nowhere.

With crown prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) proposing to launch a much delayed public offering of shares in the Saudi oil giant Aramco by December, new strategies have to be devised in pursuing the great game. The current pursuit of advantage through hard power has obviously meandered into a dead-end.

The US alignment now sees a glimmer of hope in the large-scale protests across Iraq and Lebanon. Though leaderless at the moment, these movements have articulated a shared theme of political change that bear the potential of undermining Iranian

influence. Prime Minister Hariri has resigned for the second time in less than two years. Memories of the first, when he was coerced by MBS to resign through a televised speech from Saudi territory, still remain fresh. They do the Saudi cause no good.

As the great game in the region moves into a new cycle, the reality is of increasing US incapacity and growing Saudi ineptitude. Israel remains actively engaged, though, consistent with its policy of ambiguity, refused public comments on bombing raids across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in August. It is unlikely to remain for long on the sidelines.

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