Baghdadi’s death demonstrates effectiveness of targeted raids—and the futility of endless occupations

- A few years ago, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ran the Islamic State “caliphate,” governing much of Syria and Iraq and millions of people.
- Now, the caliphate is gone, ISIS is in shambles, and Baghdadi died hiding in Idlib province, the last stronghold of anti-Assad rebels.
- The U.S. located him and raided his compound without stationing troops nearby in northwest Syria. A permanent U.S. ground presence was not needed for that success.
- The U.S. could have launched the raid from a carrier group in the Mediterranean or through a temporary agreement allowing U.S. forces to operate from Iraq or Jordan.

U.S. military capability to monitor and strike globally is unmatched

- The U.S. has the most robust intelligence-gathering capability in the world, spending more than $70 billion annually.
- That is more than the annual military budgets for the U.K., France, Germany, and even Russia.
- Along with the ability to strike targets globally through land- and sea-based aircraft, drones, and special forces, this intelligence capability enables counterterrorism strikes everywhere.

Middle East stakeholders have a strong interest in countering terror, supporting U.S. anti-terror efforts

- Local partners are useful for gathering intelligence and conducting counterterrorism raids—but this can be arranged on the basis of mutual interests without permanent U.S. security commitments.
- All major regional actors have a greater self-interest in destroying ISIS’s remnants than the U.S.; that interest encourages cooperation with U.S. anti-terror efforts.
- Syrian and Iraqi Kurds provided intelligence for the Baghdadi raid despite the end of the formal U.S.-Kurdish partnership, and Russia and Turkey permitted overflight, despite rocky U.S. relations.
- The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria and Iraq would leave ISIS’s remnants surrounded by hostile powers.

Local government is most effective at counterterrorism

- ISIS and Al-Qaeda-linked fighters remain present in Syria where the Syrian government has not yet re-established its authority.
- Despite its atrocities, the Syrian government is effective at rooting out terrorism in territory it controls.
- The administration’s plan to keep U.S. troops stationed near Syria’s oil fields and the base in Al-Tanf seems designed to deny the Syrian regime control of Syria—but undermining the Syrian government enables conditions under which terrorism can flourish.

U.S. intervention changed the balance of power in Syria—withdrawal would result in a return to that balance

- Other than preventing significant, long-term disruptions to global oil flows, the U.S. interest in the Middle East is eliminating anti-U.S. terrorist threats, primarily from radical Sunni terrorists, of which ISIS is one prominent branch.
- Completely, methodically withdrawing U.S. ground forces from Syria and Iraq would shift the counterterrorism burden from the U.S. back to local actors: Syria, Russia, Iran, Iraq, and others.
- The U.S. will continually monitor and strike anti-U.S. threats, by special forces raids or other measures if need be.
- Occupying parts of Syria, which remains impoverished and riven by sectarian conflict, is a costly and dangerous burden that we should be glad to hand off to others, especially adversaries.

Full military withdrawal from Syria allows vigilance against terrorism

- The administration has repeatedly stated its intent to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria—each time, it has failed to do so. U.S. forces continue to occupy parts of Syria and are reportedly returning to bases abandoned only weeks ago.
- With the caliphate destroyed—and ISIS’s allure with it—the U.S. military mission in Syria is complete. Staying has more to do with countering Assad, which actually harms the goal of defeating ISIS’s remnants and radical Sunni Islamists.
- U.S. withdrawal removes the risk of being dragged into a conflict over the Turkey-Syria border and reduces U.S. exposure to the Middle East’s violent political problems.
- The U.S. should accept victory over ISIS, immediately withdraw from Syria, and keep the U.S. safe through intelligence and raids.