

How Erdogan Scapegoated ISIS Caliph to Appease Biden?

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Whilst Turkish President Erdogan was in Kiev on Thursday, ostensibly brokering a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine to defuse escalating tensions following the Russian troop build-up along Ukraine’s borders and the deployment of 3,000 US forces in Poland and Romania, Biden announced that the Islamic State leader had been killed in a special-ops raid in northwest Syria along the Turkish border.

“Last night, operating on my orders, US military forces successfully removed a major terrorist threat to the world: the global leader of ISIS. Thanks to the bravery of our troops, this horrible terrorist leader is no more,” a visibly jubilant Biden tweeted.

The details of the raid were sketchy but there were civilian casualties and one of the choppers involved in the operation encountered mechanical failure and had to be destroyed, as in the Bin Laden raid at Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011 when one of the Black Hawks involved in the “secret operation” also encountered malfunction and was blown up by the Navy Seals Team Six that awakened the whole sleepy town.

According to the US [government documents](#) [1] released in September 2020, Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, whose real name was Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla, snitched for the US military and identified dozens of fellow militants as well as the structure of al-Qaeda in Iraq, after he was arrested in 2008 and detained at Camp Bucca.

Three Tactical Interrogation Reports released by the Combating Terrorism Centre (CTC) alleged that al-Baghdadi’s successor al-Mawla, who at the time was an al-Qaeda judge, gave the US occupation forces in Iraq the names of 68 al-Qaeda fighters that led to the deaths of several al-Qaeda members after the US military conducted raids to hunt them down.

According to the documents, al-Mawla was arrested in 2008 by the US forces and interrogated at Camp Bucca, a facility in Umm Qasr, southern Iraq, where Abu Bakr al-

Baghdadi was also incarcerated. Several officials have since referred to it as a “Jihadi university” because of the training provided there.

The CTC said that al-Mawla was released in 2009 and only came to prominence when he became the leader of the Islamic State following the death of al-Baghdadi in October 2019.

As in the special-ops raid eliminating al-Baghdadi’s successor al-Mawla at the densely populated town of Atmeh along Turkish border in northwest Syria, it’s important to note in the news coverage of the killing of al-Baghdadi that although the mainstream media was trumpeting for several years before the raid that the Islamic State’s fugitive chief was hiding somewhere on the Iraq-Syria border in the east, he was found hiding in northwest Idlib province, under the control of Turkey’s militant proxies and al-Nusra Front, and was killed while trying to flee to Turkey in Barisha village, just five kilometers from the border.

The reason why the mainstream media scrupulously avoided mentioning northwestern Idlib province of Syria as the most likely hideout of al-Baghdadi and his successor was to cover up the collusion between the militant proxies of Turkey and the jihadists of al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State.

In fact, the corporate media takes the issue of Islamic jihadists “commingling” with Turkey-backed “moderate rebels” in Idlib so seriously – which could give Damascus the pretext to mount an offensive in northwest Syria – that the New York Times cooked up an [exclusive report](#) [2] in October 2019, days after the Special Ops night raid eliminating al-Baghdadi, that the Islamic State paid money to al-Nusra Front for hosting al-Baghdadi in Idlib.

The morning after the night raid, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [reported](#) [3] in October 2019 that a squadron of eight helicopters accompanied by warplanes belonging to the international coalition had attacked positions of Hurras al-Din, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group, in Idlib province where the Islamic State chief was believed to be hiding.

Despite detailing the operational minutiae of the Special Ops raid, the mainstream news coverage of the raid deliberately elided over the crucial piece of information that the compound in Barisha village just five kilometers from Turkish border where al-Baghdadi was killed belonged to Hurras al-Din, an elusive terrorist outfit which had previously been targeted several times in the US airstrikes.

Although Hurras al-Din is generally assumed to be an al-Qaeda affiliate, it is in fact the regrouping of the Islamic State jihadists under a different name in northwestern Idlib governorate after the latter terrorist organization was routed from Mosul and Anbar in Iraq and Raqqa and Deir al-Zor in Syria in 2017 and was hard pressed by the US-led coalition’s airstrikes in eastern Syria.

It’s worth noting that although the Idlib governorate in Syria’s northwest has firmly been under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led by al-Nusra Front since 2015, its territory was equally divided between Turkey-backed rebels and al-Nusra Front.

In a brazen offensive in January 2019, however, al-Nusra Front’s jihadists completely routed Turkey-backed militants, even though the latter were supported by a professionally trained and highly organized military of a NATO member Turkey. Al-Nusra Front now reportedly controls more than 70% territory in the Idlib governorate.

The reason why al-Nusra Front was easily able to defeat Turkey-backed militants appeared to be that the ranks of al-Nusra Front were swelled by highly motivated and battle-hardened jihadist deserters from the Islamic State after the fall of the latter's "caliphate" in Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria in July and October 2017, respectively.

In all likelihood, some of the Islamic State's jihadists who joined the battle in Idlib were part of the contingent of thousands of Islamic State militants that fled Raqqa in October 2017 under a [deal brokered](#) [4] by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The merger of al-Nusra Front and Islamic State in Idlib didn't come as a surprise, though, since the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front used to be a single organization before a split occurred between the two militant groups in April 2013 over a leadership dispute. In fact, al-Nusra Front's chief Abu Mohammad al-Jolani was reportedly [appointed](#) [5] the emir of al-Nusra Front by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the deceased "caliph" of the Islamic State, in January 2012.

Al-Jolani returned the favor by hosting both the hunted leaders of the Islamic State for months, if not years, in safe houses in al-Nusra's territory in Idlib, before they were betrayed by informants within the ranks of the terrorist organization who leaked the information of the whereabouts of al-Baghdadi and his successor, leading to the killing of the Islamic State leaders in special-ops raids in October 2019 and on February 3.

In the book "Rage," American journalist Bob Woodward has corroborated what was long known to be an open secret: the existence of a Faustian pact between Donald Trump and President Erdogan of Turkey in which the latter agreed to cover up the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 and also let Washington hunt down Islamic State chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi hiding in Syria's Idlib, bordering Turkey, in October 2019 in return for Turkey mounting Operation Peace Spring in northeast Syria with the permission of the Trump administration.

In an informal conversation with Woodward, Donald Trump boasted that he protected Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from congressional scrutiny after the brutal assassination of Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi. "I saved his ass," Trump said in 2018, [according to the book](#) [6]. "I was able to get Congress to leave him alone. I was able to get them to stop."

When Woodward pressed Trump if he believed the Saudi crown prince ordered the assassination himself, Trump responded: "He says very strongly that he didn't do it. Bob, they spent \$400 billion over a fairly short period of time," Trump said.

"And you know, they're in the Middle East. You know, they're big. Because of their religious monuments, you know, they have the real power. They have the oil, but they also have the great monuments for religion. You know that, right? For that religion," Trump noted. "They wouldn't last a week if we're not there, and they know it," he added.

Regarding the murder of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018, the Erdogan administration released American pastor Andrew Brunson on October 12, 2018, which had been a longstanding demand of the Trump administration, and also decided not to make public the audio recordings of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi implicating Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the assassination.

In return, the Trump administration promised to comply with Turkish President Erdogan's vehement demand to evacuate American forces from the Kurdish-held areas in northeast Syria, and the withdrawal was eventually effected an year later in October 2019.

In the Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, the Turkish armed forces and their Syrian proxies invaded and occupied 120 kilometers wide and 32 kilometers deep stretch of Syrian territory between the northeastern towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. It's worth pointing out that although Turkish forces invaded northeast Syria in October 2019, the negotiations went on for almost an year since December 2018.

Trump immediately announced the withdrawal of American troops from Syria after losing the midterm elections in November 2018. But the Pentagon kept delaying the evacuation of American forces from northern Syria to appease Washington's Kurdish allies.

However, once Turkish armed forces and allied militant proxies invaded northeast Syria in October 2019, the Pentagon was left with no other choice than to redeploy American forces to Kurdish-held areas al-Hasakah and Qamishli in northeast Syria.

Donald Trump's abrupt decision to withdraw American troops from Syria was reportedly made during a telephonic conversation with Turkish President Erdogan on December 14, 2018, before President Trump made the momentous announcement in a Tweet on December 19. The decision was so sudden that it prompted the resignation of Jim Mattis, then the Secretary of Defense, according to a December 22, 2018, [Associated Press report](#) [7].

Considering the events surrounding the killing of al-Baghdadi in October 2019, it's obvious that his successor, too, was betrayed by the Turkish patrons to extract geo-strategic concessions from the Biden administration. Due to Erdogan's personal friendship with Biden's political rival Trump, Turkish leader has repeatedly been snubbed by Biden throughout the maiden year of his administration.

But after letting the Biden administration eliminate the Islamic State leader and offering to mediate in the dispute between Russia and Ukraine to defuse mounting tensions in the Eastern Europe, Erdogan is trying desperately hard to prove to the Biden administration that Turkey is still a reliable NATO ally that could play a vital role in the global power rivalry.

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Notes

[1] Islamic State's 'canary caliph' gave intelligence to US in 2008: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/islamic-state-leader-intelligence-us-government>

[2] ISIS Leader Paid Rival for Protection but Was Betrayed by His

Own: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/world/middleeast/isis-leader-al-baghdadi.html>

[3] Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi killed in US

raid: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-targeted-us-raid-officials>

[4] Raqqa's dirty secret: the deal that let Islamic State jihadists escape

Raqqa: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret

[5] Al-Jolani was appointed as the emir of al-Nusra Front by

al-Baghdadi: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/16689>

[6] Trump boasted that he protected Saudi Crown

Prince: <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-woodward-i-saved-his-ass-mbs-khashoggi-rage-2020-9>

[7] Trump call with Turkish leader led to US pullout from

Syria: <https://apnews.com/ec2ed217357048ff998225a31534df12>

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