

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State, is dead

The “caliph” was killed in a raid by American troops. But his ultra-violent jihadist group lives on



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AS ITS so-called caliphate expanded across large parts of Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group promised its followers an apocalyptic battle to come, a victory over the “crusader armies” that would usher in the day of judgment and birth a new world. The man who was to lead that battle, the self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, instead blew himself up ingloriously in a tunnel in Syria on October 26th, killing three of his children as well.

The world’s most-wanted terrorist, responsible for thousands of deaths and years of savage rule over millions of Syrians and Iraqis, met his end during a late-night raid by American troops on his hideout in Idlib province, in north-west Syria. President Donald Trump announced the operation from the White House the next morning. He said eight helicopters swooped in and soldiers blasted their way into Mr Baghdadi’s compound, chasing him into a tunnel that had no exit. A cornered Mr Baghdadi is said to have detonated a suicide vest. His identity was confirmed by a DNA test on his remains. “He died like a dog, he died like a coward,” declared Mr Trump.

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Born Ibrahim al-Badri near Samarra, in Iraq, much of Mr Baghdadi’s early life is murky. He was arrested in 2004, not long after the American invasion of Iraq, and held in Camp Bucca, a prison that would become notorious for its role as a sort of graduate seminar for aspiring jihadists. At the time, though, the Americans saw him as a low-level thug and released him later that year. Even by the standards of a shambolic occupation, that was a disastrous mistake. He would re-emerge in public in 2010 as the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, which would soon expand its remit to Syria (and rename itself Islamic State).

In 2014, as his group routed the Iraqi army and swept through much of the country’s Sunni-majority north and west, Mr Baghdadi climbed the pulpit of a mosque in Mosul to declare a caliphate. Thousands of supporters from around the world flocked to join an orgy of violence. Prisoners were beheaded, burned alive and crucified. Women were kept as sex slaves. Civilians under the group’s rule could disappear into its torture chambers for smoking or shaving their beards. Thousands of Yazidis, a religious minority that lives mostly in northern Iraq, were killed in genocidal massacres. The group was so barbaric that even al-Qaeda denounced it—though for self-interested reasons, not out of a concern for human rights.

The caliphate was eventually smashed, in Iraq and Syria, by varying coalitions involving American air power, Iranian-sponsored Shia militias, the Iraqi army and Syrian Kurdish fighters. The victory was won at the cost of thousands of Iraqi soldiers and Syrian fighters killed in grinding urban warfare. Civilians who survived the onslaught emerged to find their cities ruined, and reconstruction has been slow.

Mr Trump’s press conference left unanswered questions. One is how and why Mr Baghdadi wound up in Idlib. The journey from the east of Syria, where IS held sway, would require crossing either regime-held territory or a stretch of land ringed with Turkish observation posts—difficult, but not impossible for a man with means. Once there, though, Mr Baghdadi would have been in hostile territory. Idlib is largely controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Qaeda’s onetime Syrian affiliate. The groups have fought in the past and HTS has executed IS members captured in Idlib. There is speculation that Mr Baghdadi was meeting with members of the Hurras al-Din group, which is active in Idlib and affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

Turkey and Syria’s main Kurdish force claim to have provided intelligence or support for the American operation. Mr Trump thanked them, as well as Russia, Syria and Iraq for their co-operation. (By contrast, he said European countries were a “tremendous disappointment” for not taking back captured IS fighters held in Syria.)

North-east Syria, from where American-backed Kurdish forces pushed out IS, has grown more chaotic since Mr Trump ordered the withdrawal of American troops from the region earlier this month. His decision (which has been partially reversed) cleared the way for Turkey to invade and uproot the Kurdish fighters known as the People’s Protection Units, or YPG. Russian and Syrian troops have moved in as well. Mr Trump denies that there was any connection between the withdrawal and the raid. Mr Baghdadi was found in a province under Turkish protection, in a village less than 5km from the Turkish border.

Watching Mr Trump at the lectern, there were obvious parallels to 2011, when Barack Obama announced a similar raid that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, in his Pakistani hideout. Americans gathered in the streets to celebrate what seemed like an enormous victory in their “war on terror”, then a decade old. Yet the horrors of IS were still to come. The would-be “caliph” is gone. But IS lives on and, according to Mr Trump’s own defence department, it is making a comeback. The chaos in the Middle East that allowed its ultra-violent form of jihadism to rise in the first place has only grown worse.