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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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29.10.2019

The murder of Baghdadi and Washington's crisis in the Middle East

Donald Trump's Sunday morning speech announcing the targeted assassination of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leader Abu Baker al-Baghdadi was another degrading spectacle expressing the criminalization of the US government and the terminal crisis of American democracy.

Trump reveled in what he described as the "ruthless," "vicious" and "violent" killing of the ISIS leader, claiming that he died like a "coward" and a "dog."

Describing Baghdadi and his followers as both "losers" and "savage monsters," Trump asserted that, as a result of the US special operations raid into Syria, "the world is a safer place."

This is, of course, all nonsense. The strategic value of Baghdadi's death is negligible. By all accounts, he was by the time of his killing a sick man who had been badly wounded in a 2017 air strike, forced into hiding and playing little role in the operations of ISIS. All that will come from his assassination and from Trump's thuggish and provocative rhetoric is another wave of terrorist violence.



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivering a sermon at a mosque in Iraq. (Militant video via AP, File)

Trump's only real interest in ordering the killing was securing a "safer place" for himself in the Oval Office under conditions where he has come under increasingly sharp attack from within the US ruling establishment and its military and intelligence apparatus over his policy in the Middle East.

As with the 2011 targeted killing of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, it is likely that the account given of Baghdadi's death will over time prove to be largely fabricated.

As for "monsters," there is no question that Baghdadi and ISIS carried out monstrous acts in the course of the movements's ascendancy in and subsequent conquest of large portions of Iraq and Syria. But both were ultimately the creation of US imperialism's unending wars in the Middle East, beginning with the 1991 Persian Gulf War and followed by the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2003 "shock and awe" campaign in Iraq, the wars for regime change in Libya and Syria and the so-called war against ISIS itself.

These wars have killed millions, while driving tens of millions from their homes, creating the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. The war crimes committed by US imperialism in the Middle East far eclipse the atrocities carried out by ISIS, which were merely one of their poisonous byproducts. The brutal and backward ideology of Baghdadi and ISIS could gain a following only through the obliteration of Iraqi society and the deliberate provocation of sectarian conflicts.

Baghdadi's own trajectory makes this clear. He joined the Sunni rebellion against the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 and was detained by US forces in 2004 during the siege of Fallujah. He was held for 11 months in the infamous US prison and torture center at Abu Ghraib and subsequently at Camp Bucca, where Islamists captured by the American military were allowed to recruit and train adherents. He was then released.

He emerged as the leader of a group in Iraq that was affiliated with Al Qaeda, an organization that itself was a product of the CIA-orchestrated war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It was able to grow amid Sunni disaffection with the American occupation and subsequently the repressive policies carried out by the US-backed regime in Baghdad, which was led by Shia sectarian parties.

By 2013, it moved into Syria, gaining arms, funding and recruits thanks to the US-NATO-backed regime change operation, which relied on Islamist militias as its proxy ground troops. It could gain a disoriented following for its reactionary sectarian ideology internationally only thanks to the decades of US crimes against predominantly Muslim countries.

The organization known as ISIS became a problem for Washington only after it surged back across Iraq's western border, seizing roughly a third of the country from the corrupt US-backed regime.

Baghdadi was someone not only known to the US intelligence agencies, but by all evidence an asset of at least one of their factions. He had played a useful role in the sectarian divide-and-rule strategy in Iraq and the regime change war in Syria.

His death came about not because he was suddenly discovered in his hideout in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, the last redoubt of the former Al Qaeda-led forces of the CIA-funded "Free Syrian Army." Rather, it was because previous protection was withdrawn. Once whatever elements within the CIA or military intelligence were convinced that Baghdadi was no longer more useful alive than dead, his fate was sealed.

This was patently the case with bin Laden in 2011, who had been ensconced in a walled compound in Abbottabad, where he was a ward of Pakistani military intelligence.

The timing of Baghdadi's death was entirely political. Trump's green-lighting earlier this month of the Turkish invasion of northeastern Syria and his partial pullout of US troops from the region had triggered a political firestorm in Washington, not only eroding his support within the Republican Party as he faces impeachment, but also provoking what amounted to a near mutiny within the military brass.

He has attempted to counter this opposition not only with the Baghdadi assassination, but also by sending US troops back into Syria with the mission of "securing" the country's oil fields. An armored unit, reportedly comprised of 30 Abrams tanks and 500 support troops, is being sent into northeastern Syria for that purpose.

Trump stated that US troops “may have to fight for the oil” in a region where Turkish, Russian, Syrian government, Kurdish and Sunni Islamist forces are all operating in close proximity. He added that he may “make a deal with an ExxonMobil or one of our great companies” to go in and exploit it “properly.”

Trump used the occasion to also reprise his condemnation of the US war Iraq on the grounds that Washington did not “keep the oil.”

While confirming the real motive for the wars launched in the name of fighting terrorism and “weapons of mass destruction”—securing US hegemony over strategic oil-producing regions—Trump also provided a blunt explanation of why he and significant layers within the US ruling class want a strategic shift from the wars in the Middle East.

“We’re in that Middle East now for \$8 trillion,” he said, adding, “I’ll tell you who loves us being there, Russia and China. Because while they build their military, we’re depleting our military there.”

Behind Trump’s demagogic vows to bring an end to Washington’s “forever wars” lies a strategic orientation to preparing for war against the US’s principal “great power” rivals, nuclear-armed Russia and China.

There is little evidence that the killing of Baghdadi will have even the extremely limited impact on popular consciousness produced by the assassination of bin Laden.

Within the bourgeois media and the leadership of the Democratic Party, however, it has produced the desired effect. Typical of the media’s reaction was the statement of ABC correspondent Terry Moran, who described the killing as “a big victory for the president” and affirming that “this is the kind of presidential leadership that people do expect.”

It may be the leadership that the media’s talking heads expect, but there is no reason to malign the entire American people by claiming that what they want from Washington are more extrajudicial killings.

As for the Democrats, all of their congressional leaders described the killing as a major victory, while using it to argue for continuing the US wars in the Middle East. Bernie Sanders, the supposedly left candidate for the party’s presidential nomination, tweeted his approval of the assassination of the “murderer and terrorist,” while hailing the “brave efforts of the Kurds and other US allies.”

Adam Schiff, who is leading the impeachment investigation against Trump, was typical of the Democratic response. He described the murder as an “operational success,” while

lamenting the fact that Trump had failed to provide prior notice to the congressional leadership.

“Had this escalated, had something gone wrong, had we gotten into a fire fight with the Russians, it’s to the administration’s advantage to say, ‘We informed Congress we were going in, they were aware of the risks,’” he said.

But while Schiff was arguing the value of congressional cover for an operation that could have escalated into World War Three, Trump was insisting that he did not tell Democrats in Congress about the planned killing because they could have leaked the information, i.e., that his political opponents are “traitors.”

To the extent that the media and the Democrats criticized Trump, it was in large measure by contrasting his reckless rhetoric to Obama’s supposedly dignified treatment of the killing of bin Laden.

The reality is that Obama bequeathed to the fascistic presidency of Donald Trump an apparatus and pseudo-legal justification for targeted assassinations across the globe, including against US citizens.

Under conditions of a mass upsurge that has seen millions take to the streets to demand an end to capitalist oppression and social inequality—from Chile to Lebanon—along with a resurgence of strikes in the US by autoworkers, teachers and other sections of the working class, the danger is that extra-judicial killings will be increasingly utilized as a tool of social repression both at home and abroad.

The attempt by Trump—abetted by the Democrats and the media—to promote the killing of Baghdadi as a “unifying moment” will be immediately eclipsed by the inexorable intensification of the class struggle in the US and around the globe. The critical task is arming this growing movement with an international socialist program.

28 October 2019