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.

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 impersario 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 slapped down the 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.