

Middle East winners and losers

By Gwynne Dyer

The death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi serves as a symbolic full stop to the many civil wars that have engulfed Syria in the past eight years, although Baghdadi was not personally in charge of anything by the time he died. The outcome of all those wars was already becoming clear, and it is the Russians and Bashar al-Assad who have won.

Donald Trump's abrupt withdrawal of American troops from eastern Syria makes the Russian victory clear: within days, there were Russian soldiers taking selfies in the abandoned American bases on the Syrian side of the frontier with Turkey.

Trump's elaborate thanks to the Russian, Syrian and Turkish governments for their aid in the Baghdadi operation was a genuflection before the powers that now really count in the region, but the Russian response was as disdainful as ever. 'We are unaware of any alleged (Russian) assistance during this operation,' said Maj.-Gen. Igor Konashenkov.

The Russian contempt for Trump is understandable, but showing it so publicly is self-indulgent and quite untypical. They clearly have some hold over the man, but why flaunt it? Perhaps their victory is going to their heads, because they can never have expected to win so decisively. But that is a question for another day.

What have the Russians won? Four years after they began providing air support to a Syrian regime that was teetering on the brink of defeat, Bashar al-Assad's brutal rule once again extends over almost all of Syria. They never had to commit Russian ground troops to combat, and yet they are now the dominant outside power in the entire Fertile Crescent.

Assad didn't do too badly either. First he cleared the rebels out of all the big cities, then he regained control of all Arabic-speaking rural areas except the northwestern province of Idlib, and now his troops are re-occupying most of the Kurdish-speaking east without a fight.

He never had to fight Baghdadi's 'Islamic State' either. It was a Syrian Kurdish militia with U.S. air support that destroyed the part of IS that was located in Syria. And when Donald Trump pulled U.S. troops out of Syria on October 6, betraying the Kurds, Russian diplomacy finessed that into another win for Assad.

The Syrian Kurds were immediately attacked by Turkey, which intended to ethnically 'cleanse' the Kurdish population from northeastern Syria and replace them with Arabic-speaking refugees from other parts of Syria. It was almost certainly Russian emissaries who persuaded the Kurds to give up their dream of independence and invite the Syrian army back in to protect them from the Turks.

When the Syrian army went back in last week it was accompanied by enough Russian soldiers to deter the Turks from shooting at it, so Syrian troops now control most of the border and ethnic cleansing is presumably off the menu. Turkish troops still hold some bits of Syrian territory that they grabbed last week, but Ankara has publicly stated that it will not try to keep them indefinitely.

It was really the Russians who rescued the Kurds, so you can guess where their loyalty lies now. And remarkably, the Turks are coming around as well.

Turkish strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan backed the jihadi rebels throughout the Syrian civil war and still protects them in their last stronghold in Idlib. He even kept the border with Syria open so that foreign jihadis could cross to join Islamic State. But he is a pragmatist who understands the new realities, and within months he will reopen diplomatic relations with Assad's regime in Syria.

That will mean that Turkey can no longer provide military protection to the jihadi groups in Idlib (most of whom now acknowledge the leadership of Osama bin-Laden's old organisation, al-Qaeda). Thereupon the final operation to reconquer Idlib can begin,

although it may be done quite slowly and methodically to keep the Syrian army's casualties down.

The Russians have accomplished everything they set out to do in the region in 2015, and the main risk they face now is over-confidence. They saved Assad and he owes them a lot, but he also owes Iran, which provided and paid for the foreign Shia volunteers who provided vitally needed military manpower when the Syrian army was running out.

They have drawn Turkey away from its old reflexive loyalty to NATO, but it is still a member of the alliance and Erdogan's political position in Turkey is weakening.

Vladimir Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia two weeks ago went well, because Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman has been seeking friends elsewhere after Trump did nothing in response to the recent drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's oilfields. But MbS's position at home is hardly secure either.

The truth is that Russia has won the prize, but the prize is a can of worms.