The Truth of the Matter

“The Islamic State’s Next Wave”

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CSIS CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
I'm Bob Schieffer.

And I'm Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And this is The Truth of the Matter.

This is a podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day. Since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts, many of them from the CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing, just informed discussion.

To get the truth of the matter on the US raid targeting ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, We'll talk with Seth Jones. He holds the Harold Brown Chair, and is Director of the Transnational Threats Project, and is a Senior Advisor to the International Security Program at The Center For Strategic and International Studies. Prior to CSIS, he served as Representative for the Commander U.S. Special Operations Command to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations.

Thank you, Seth for joining us here on The Truth of the Matter. We're going to start something on this broadcast today called check back. As I was thinking about putting this broadcast together, we are so overwhelmed with news now something big happens, we report on that, and then before we can continue the reporting, let alone the analysis on that, something else happens which washes that away. So, what we're going to do from time to time is check back.

You were here, we all talked about this raid that the U.S. made and all of that, but look at all the things that have happened since then. That happened right after the United States had withdrawn our troops from Northern Syria. So what's happened since the raid? Where are we now? What's the situation?

Well, I think one of the most interesting developments after the raid is that the Islamic State wastes very little time in appointing a successor, someone who goes under the name Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi.

Immediately afterwards then, the Islamic State also releases a message that they are going to retaliate for the American strike. So we have this situation where the U.S. kills the leader of the Islamic State, they quickly appoint a successor and vow revenge.

I think one of the things it highlights to me is also how far we are from this thing ending. They have tried to rebound very quickly just as the U.S. is also continuing to pull back its forces from The Middle East.

But you had just put together a report that, if I understand it, you're basically saying yes, this was a blow to ISIS losing al-Baghdadi. But the other part is
they're so dispersed now, they still have the ability to strike it any number places. So al-Baghdadi is dead, but not ISIS.

Seth Jones: Well, if you look back over the last several years, this is not the first time that a senior jihadist leader has been killed. We go back to 2003, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of September 11, was captured by the United States. A couple of years later, Abu Mussab al-Akkari, The predecessor of al-Baghdadi was killed. 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed.

Seth Jones: We've had a series of leaders killed, yet a range of jihadist activity continues. I think as we look today around the globe, we see activity and violence in West Africa, North Africa, East Africa, a range of places in the Middle East, jihadists that are trying to retake territory in countries like Afghanistan, and then attacks in the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh. This is evolved into a transnational series of movements.

Bob Schieffer: What do we do next? What will they do next?

Seth Jones: Well, I think one of the things that they are already trying to do is to continue to attack. One of the things we often forget is how active they are online on the internet. In fact, the Wall Street Journal put out a really interesting piece recently in the month of October highlighting how TikTok had to take down a range of pages because the Islamic State was using TikTok as a way to push out ideology and to recruit new younger members.

Seth Jones: So what the Islamic State and other groups are trying to do is to bring in young members, teenagers, 20 somethings, to bring them into jihadist ideology by reaching out to them on Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and other platforms that they use.

Bob Schieffer: One of the interesting things as we look back on this raid is the detailed description of what happened from, among others, the President of the United States. We know there were cameras, we saw some of the pictures from up above this whole thing was being photographed. We see that happen, but as the President explained it al-Baghdadi died a coward's death backed into a corner. He said he whined, he cried, he screamed, and yet nobody else has been able to confirm that.

Could he have possibly gotten that information from somebody that the Secretary of Defense, the Commander of the Special Ops, and the Chief General in charge of the Army, the Army Chief of Staff?

Seth Jones: Well, it's not clear. We haven't been able to get a second or third source to provide information on some aspects of the raid. What it does look like is that al-Baghdadi was in a house from actually interestingly an Al-Qaeda member that was part of the group, HAD, that he was in an Al-Qaeda, not even an Islamic State safe house, that the US had tracked him down through, among other
things, a well-placed Kurdish SDF source, so just as the US is withdrawing from parts of Syria, abandoning the Syrian Democratic forces, the Kurdish majority force in the area, they were pivotal to the raid. And then also that al-Baghdadi blew himself up with a suicide belt and then killed children around him. That part we've got a fair amount of info. To what degree he was screaming like a... That is not been confirmed. Some of that may certainly have been used for drama.

Bob Schieffer: Are people in the intelligence and the defense communities, were they concerned about that? Because it seems to me that would encourage ISIS to plan some revenge. Which I'm sure they would anyway.

Seth Jones: My sense is, and people that I've spoken to, the Islamic State doesn't need additional motivation to conduct attacks against the U.S., Western Europe, or other locations. I think the issue is American Presidents in general and leaders that speak about these things, do try, or at least in the past, whether they're Republicans or Democrats, to be as precise and as truthful as possible about the information they're providing.

That may have caused some concern, but not that the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda are going to hit the U.S. back harder, because they have all the motivation they need.

Bob Schieffer: Andrew.

Andrew Schwartz: Thank you, Bob. Seth, you mentioned that ISIS's reaches wide and far. Well, we even saw it last Friday, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack in Northern Mali, where 53 soldiers and one civilian were killed in an attack that ISIS claimed responsibility for. So, already with their new leadership, they seem to be back at it.

Seth Jones: West Africa is an interesting place, because what we see there is probably the biggest single increase in jihadist activity anywhere on the planet. Part of it is the Islamic States local affiliate, or Jama’a, they're called the Islamic State Greater Sahara. Al-Qaeda also has a very large network under the leadership of an individual named Iyad Ag Ghaly, they go by the acronym JNIM. They're very active. This is also an area where the U.S. has largely pulled out of, where the French are active.

But I think this does go to show you how quickly they responded and how much they've taken credit in an area that most people, most Americans, aren't going to recognize that they're active in.

Andrew Schwartz: What does it do with us pulling out of these areas? You mentioned we pulled out of Syria, we pulled out of this area in Africa, we're pulling out of Afghanistan. What does this do to us and our ability to fight terrorism, to fight ISIS, to fight Al-Qaeda, and other groups?
Seth Jones: If the U.S. can't get a partner to fill in that vacuum, then it does two things. One is it shows that we are not committed to these areas at the very time that people are suffering from attacks. And the second it gives an opportunity to these groups and these networks to resurge.

If we use the Syria case as an example, can we expect as we withdraw from these areas to get the same quality of intelligence from assets to risk their lives to provide information to us at the very moment we're leaving? It's a very dangerous thing to ask somebody to keep eyes on a house where al-Baghdadi is living. You're risking your life.

Andrew Schwartz: Because that's what this guy did for months. The Kurd who was working for the SDF undercover was embedded with al-Baghdadi and giving day to day information about his comings and goings to the United States, correct?

Seth Jones: Yes. He was someone that was trusted by the Islamic State and al-Baghdadi to help arrange his movement and the locations where he was moving.

Andrew Schwartz: The SDF operative was so close, he was there every day on the ground. We can't get that type of intelligence if we're not in these regions, right?

Seth Jones: If you're going to ask a group and individuals within that group to risk their lives for you, to provide intelligence, particularly human intelligence, because they're part of the very networks that you're attempting to target, if you're going to ask them to risk their lives and at that very moment also abandon them, I think you're going to lose people willing to do that. This is also the danger you have if we start to see a resurgence of this activity in Afghanistan as the U.S. is abandoning it. Why are people going to risk their lives to provide intelligence on people plotting attacks against the U.S. if we're abandoning... That I think is the biggest risk that we face with abandonment of some of these locations.

Bob Schieffer: How is this going down across the region? What's happened in Iran since then? How are they viewing this in Israel? Has this had any impact on our forces in Iraq?

Seth Jones: I think one of the most interesting video clips that became public was as the U.S. was moving its military forces out of Manbij and other areas of Northern Syria, these vehicles were being pelleted by fruit from local Kurdish communities who were incensed that the U.S. was pulling out. So on the downside, the friends that we're abandoning are angry that we're doing that.

I think the reaction both within Moscow and within Tehran, two of the U.S.'s is most notable competitors was joy that we were leaving an area that they could then push in forces. Probably the clearest case of that was the photographs that emerge within days of the U.S. departure from bases in Manbij, where Russian flags were hoisted at those very bases that U.S. Special Operations had just evacuated. That tells you who's moved into the vacuum.
Bob Schieffer: Well, they were showing on Russian television, a Russian correspondence saying, "They left and here we are."

Seth Jones: With Russian flags in the background. The symbolism there is very, very important to understand.

Andrew Schwartz: You're saying the same thing could happen if we pull out of Afghanistan.

Seth Jones: The Russians have already been in the process of attempting to negotiate the peace deal with the Taliban right now. The Chinese are the largest backers in the region, particularly of Pakistan, of foreign aid through the Belt and Road Initiative. A U.S. abandon of that area gets filled both by the Russians and in that case the Chinese.

Seth Jones: I think part of it is understanding that when you pull out of areas you're not leaving a vacuum, someone else will fill it. The question is who, and is that in the U.S.'s interest?

Bob Schieffer: Well, is Assad now more firmly in control than he's ever been of his country?

Seth Jones: Absolutely. He had already started moving in that direction before the US withdrew its forces from the North. They had retaken territory in most of the West of the country. Damascus and the areas around it. Obviously, Aleppo Homs in the South, Dura. The Assad regime had already started. Now they're in the process of finishing the job.

Bob Schieffer: This pullout, how far up in the Pentagon would it have gone, or in the State Department, that we were getting this information from the Kurds? Who would have known this? The information we used to trap and kill Baghdadi?

Seth Jones: Well first of all, it would have been known by the operators and those in the Pentagon and the Special Operations community and obviously in the intelligence community. I think at the very least the Secretaries of Defense and the Director of Central Intelligence would have been aware.

Seth Jones: I was in the Pentagon when the bin Laden raid happened and the number of people that were aware of very sensitive information was small in the Pentagon. Secretary obviously was aware, the Special Operations leadership on a need to know basis they were aware, but that's about it. We have to be very sensitive with this information.

Bob Schieffer: So it would be possible that the President himself didn't know about any of this.

Seth Jones: Well, I don't know what was briefed to the President. It would have been normal for the President to have been aware that there was information coming in about the whereabouts of Baghdadi. How much and how much was given to him, I don't know the answer. That's not been reported much publicly.
Bob Schieffer: So he may well have announced the pullout from Syria not knowing about this, or he could have announced it knowing very well this was coming and just decided to make this announcement anyway.

Seth Jones: My sense is, based on past counter terrorism operations and my own involvement in these, is the President would not have known that there was a high probability that we were going to strike at the time that we did when the announcement of Syria was made, because what it looks like anyway was that the decision to hit Baghdadi was made not long before the attack actually happened, so it's highly unlikely the President would have known with fidelity where Baghdadi was, that we were likely to hit that, when he made the announcement to pull out of Syria.

Bob Schieffer: But it occurs to me that had the Pentagon, had the top ranks of our defense and foreign policy establishment known that this was coming, and the President had said, "Boys, I'm thinking about pulling out of Northern Syria." Somebody would have said, "Well, now make sure Mr. President would want to make you aware of something that's going on here." But it seems to me like in some way or the other, there was just simply no communication.

Seth Jones: That at this point is a black box right now. We do not know what those conversations look like and how much the President was briefed on that.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, Seth, let me ask you this. Now that Baghdadi is gone, what is his most significant legacy?

Seth Jones: I think there are two things that will be his legacy. I think anyone who aspires to mirror Baghdadi will look very carefully at them. One is his willingness to seize and hold territory, to establish a Caliphate, not just a name, but in deed. He controlled territory about the size of Belgium and people flocked from Europe, some from the United States, from Australia, from central Asia, from Africa. They came from around the world to be a part of his self-proclaimed Caliphate. That's something that bin Laden never really did. Certainly nowhere near that level.

Andrew Schwartz: Bin Laden saw himself more like a military leader. Baghdadi saw himself as something larger than that.

Seth Jones: Bin Laden partnered with organizations on the ground. They partnered with the Taliban who controlled the territory. Baghdadi wanted to do more than just partner. He wanted to own it himself. And that's what they did.

The second thing that Baghdadi did was to really reignite the interest in the Islamic State and its ideology online. He used, in ways that no one previously had done in the jihadist community, social media, everything from Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, to internet sites to attract individuals and radicalize them online, to bring in money to recruit them. Baghdadi revolutionized the use
of social media in ways that actually became an inspiration for the far right and other extremists, even those that had no interest in Islamic extremism. He revolutionized how extremists were thinking about that.

Andrew Schwartz: What do you think the next wave of ISIS is going to be?

Seth Jones: I think the fact that we saw Baghdadi die at a compound that was owned by a senior member of Al-Qaeda in Syria raises this question about whether we'll see Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, instead of fighting each other, which is what they've done in areas of Syria and Afghanistan, is whether we'll start to see a merger between networks there.

The irony is the U.S., in some ways, it has had the best case scenario. The two largest jihadist networks have basically been at each other's throats. If we see a merger as a possibility, the number of forces that we're seeing in Iraq and Syria alone is almost 40,000. They're pretty significant between the two. If you were to see a little bit more cooperation between those two movements, I think this would be a very serious and concerning development.

Bob Schieffer: What about those prisoners that the Kurds were holding there in Northern Syria? Do we know how many of them got away?

Seth Jones: We know that there are still roughly on the order of about 10,000 Islamic State fighters including held at areas like Al-Hal. Most of them for the moment have not been released, as far as we're aware. The numbers that have escaped or been released are probably in the double digits right now, but there are a lot of potential opportunities for them to be released.

Seth Jones: The challenge right now is most European, Central Asian, and other governments don't want them to come back. They don't want to prosecute them. They don't want them radicalizing even in their prisons. So they're sitting right now in detention facilities under the Syrian democratic forces.

Seth Jones: This is also a challenge as the U.S. has withdrawn from parts of Syria is we haven't solved this issue of what to do with those detained, including their wives and their children.

Bob Schieffer: Well, are the Turkish forces, are they helping to keep them contained, or are they just standing back and leaving it to the Kurds?

Seth Jones: No. We've even heard this week that the Turks are putting additional pressure on a range of governments to take back their fighters. Europeans for example, who won't take them. In some cases they've actually revoked their citizenship.

We also have the additional problem of asking the Kurds, or that Kurdish Majority Syrian Democratic Forces and the Turks to work out a bargain here, are like asking two rival sports teams to do a deal with each other. They're at each
other's throats right now, so I think that's probably highly unlikely. The more likely option is to get a neighboring country like the Iraqis to take more, which they have.

Bob Schieffer: Also the President was talking about we need to stay and guard the oil there. Is there anything new on that?

Seth Jones: No, not at this point. Except I think there's a broad question about what the US's long-term strategy is and what the optics are. If it looks over the long run like the US is less interested in supporting Kurdish forces in the region, but we are there interested in oil, that's not exactly an ideal optic to have. It shows that we're interested in the economic profit, but not in loyalty to any of the actors on the ground.

Bob Schieffer: Well, Seth Jones, thank you very much once again for helping getting us to the truth of this matter.

Seth Jones: Thank you.

Bob Schieffer: We'll be back again next week. I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I'm manager Schwartz.

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