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# Targeted Killings: Is Organizational Decapitation an Effective Counterterrorism Strategy?

by

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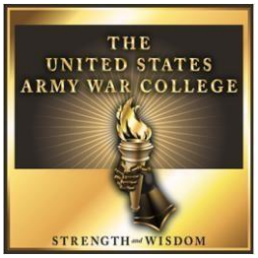


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## Abstract

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Targeted killings are a highly visible element of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy. A common misconception is that these are low risk and low cost tactics that dismantle terrorist organizations using precision-guided munitions. Despite the killing of hundreds of so-called terrorist leaders by way of drones, fighter aircraft, and Special Forces raids over the past 14 years, the United States does not appear any closer to winning the "long war." Research suggests that leadership targeting causes organizational collapse in about 30 percent of terrorist organizations. The most resilient organizations are those that are religious based or more than 10 years old. The least resilient are separatist in nature or less than 10 years old. Research further indicates an increase in violent attacks and a decrease in suicide bombings following the loss of the inspirational or operational leader. However, these findings should concern policy makers, as 67 percent of the foreign terrorist organizations designated by the Department of State are resilient to the tactic.

# Targeted Killings: Is Organizational Decapitation an Effective Counterterrorism Strategy?

## Introduction

The United States has used drone strikes, fighter aircraft, and Special Forces raids to kill or capture terrorist leaders such as al-Qa'ida's Usama bin Laden and al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's Anwar al-Awlaki. The publicity associated with targeted killings served as a catalyst for numerous journal articles, legal reviews, and books discussing the morality or legality of targeted killings. While the vast majority of counterterrorism research and analysis has focused on the effectiveness of the broad, overarching governmental strategy, far less information is available on the effectiveness of these killings in dismantling a terrorist organization.[1]

The purpose of this paper is to determine the effectiveness of targeted killings within the broader U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Following the introduction, the author will define key terms and definitions, describe the research methodology, outline the national security and counterterrorism strategies, and then frame the decapitation strategy. The literature review provides insight into: 1) the overall likelihood of organizational collapse following a decapitation event; 2) the characteristics of terrorist organizations that make them more or less susceptible to decapitation events; 3) whether it is better to kill or capture the leader; and 4) an assessment of organizational degradation. Finally, the paper will conclude with the policy implications associated with these findings.

## Terms and Definitions

This paper uses the terms “leadership targeting” and “decapitation” interchangeably to describe military operations planned and conducted for the primary purpose of capturing and/or killing the top leader or group of leaders within an enemy organization. Title 22, Section 2656f (a) of the United States Code defines “’international terrorism’ as terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country. The term ‘terrorism’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents. The term ‘terrorist group’ means any group practicing, or which has significant subgroups which practice international terrorism.”[23]

Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act assigns the responsibility of designating and maintaining a list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) to the U.S. State Department. The designation as an FTO allows the United States to curtail support to these organizations through a variety of means that range from law enforcement to seizing financial assets to coerce these organizations to renounce terrorism. Within the State Department, the Bureau of Counterterrorism continually monitors terrorist groups around the world to assess their attacks as well as their ability to conduct future attacks.[4]

A successful “decapitation event” is defined as the capture or killing of the top leader or top tier of leader(s) by the opposition. For the purpose of this paper, the decapitation strategy is deemed a success if the terrorist organization collapses or is no longer conducting terrorist acts within two years of the decapitation event. The two-year time limit is useful for two reasons. First, the Department of State, prior to the

Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA), was required to redesignate FTOs every 2 years or the designation would lapse. Second, two of the larger quantitative studies on leadership decapitation used the two-year threshold to evaluate their data sets and provided commonality between studies.

The term high value target (HVT) describes a broad range of individuals that provide valuable and/or unique skills to the organization. Although terrorist leaders are HVTs, not all HVTs are terrorist leaders. Due to the broad applicability of this term, the author has chosen to limit its use.

## Methodology

Determining the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies, such as leadership targeting, is difficult due to the unique challenges facing researchers of terrorism. First, terrorist organizations tend to live in the shadows, obscure their identity, and choose to act anonymously or blame other organizations for terrorist attacks. Therefore, collecting reliable data is difficult. Second, findings are potentially obsolete before release as terrorist organizations continuously change and adapt tactics. Finally, the majority of terrorism research relies on open sources that allow for broader dissemination but lack the level of understanding that classified data may provide.[5]

In light of these challenges, the author relied heavily on secondary sources based on both quantitative and qualitative research of targeted killings and the decapitation strategy. The author conducted a literature review of over 200 sources that included Ph.D. dissertations, Master's theses papers, academic journals, books written on related topics, and newspaper articles. Primary sources include official government

publications, national security strategy, and national counterterrorism reports. The author has synthesized the findings from the body of work to inform policy makers on the effectiveness of the strategy.

## Nature of the Current Security Environment

Today's national security environment is extremely complex as the world changes at an ever-accelerating pace. Globalization and proliferation of technology have placed capabilities once reserved for world powers in the hands of non-state actors and terrorists. The combination of ungoverned or under-governed territories and unemployed and hopeless youth, fueled by social media, have provided fertile ground for recruiting the next generation of violent extremists.[6] Weak governance across the Middle East and Northwest Africa, coupled with the loss of core al-Qa'ida leadership within Pakistan has accelerated the decentralization of the movement. Al-Qa'ida affiliates have become more autonomous and, in many cases, more violent as experience with the affiliates based within Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Northwest Africa, and Somalia reflects.[7]

The Department of State's current list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations contains a list of 59 groups. Many of the names on the list are all too familiar to Americans. The name that most will recognize is al-Qa'ida. The leaders of Al-Qa'ida were the primary targets of the U.S. counterterrorism efforts since 9/11. Despite degrading al-Qa'ida's core leadership through hundreds of decapitation strikes across the Middle East, al-Qa'ida and its affiliates continue to present a serious threat to the United States, our allies, and our interests around the world.[8]

## U.S. National Security & National Strategy for Counterterrorism

In response to this new environment and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the defeat of global terrorism became a central component of President George W. Bush's 2002 *National Security Strategy*. The strategy states that "our priority will be first to disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations of global reach and attack their leadership; command, control, communications; material support; and finances."[9] In response to this guidance, the United States has spent significant time, energy, and resources on preemptive measures to disrupt, degrade, and eventually destroy terrorist organizations that threaten our national interests.

The most current version of the *U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, published in June 2011, describes the current security environment and the "whole of government approach" required to accomplish the strategy's overall goals. The guiding principles of the strategy include U.S. core values, building partnerships, applying counterterrorism tools and capabilities appropriately, and building a culture of resilience. The overarching goals include 1) protection of the American people, homeland, and interests; 2) to disrupt, degrade, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and adherents; and 3) to prevent terrorist development, acquisition, and use of weapons of mass destruction.[10]

The recently released U.S. *National Security Strategy*, published in February 2015, states that the overall U.S. strategy to combat terrorism has shifted away from costly ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to a more sustainable, targeted counterterrorism approach. The strategy specifies, "outside of areas of active hostilities, we endeavor to detain, interrogate, and prosecute terrorists through law enforcement.

However, when there is a continuing, imminent threat, and when capture or other actions to disrupt the threat are not feasible, we will not hesitate to take decisive action." The strategy credits the interagency team for delivering "justice to Osama bin Laden and significantly degrading al-Qa'ida's core leadership." Although the strategy mentions capacity building among partners, countering extremist rhetoric, inclusive governments, and the rule of law, the dominant and most visible element of the strategy remains the use of lethal actions.[11]

## Decapitation Strategy

The strategy of targeting your enemy's leaders is not new. Sun Tzu, a Chinese military general, strategist, and philosopher, advocated such a strategy of targeting the military and political leadership to disrupt or defeat an enemy. Advocates of the modern decapitation strategy believe that similar benefits apply today. The attractiveness of the decapitation strategy, to both civilian and military leaders, stems from the view that capturing and/or killing the enemy's leadership is a tactic that reduces the enemy's capabilities and increases the likelihood of a quick victory.[12]

According to Robert Pape, for example, an organization's leadership "is like a body's brain: destroy it and the body dies; isolate it and the body is paralyzed; confuse it and the body is uncontrollable." Pape's book *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* identifies three variants that include leadership decapitation (force regime change for a more favorable successor), political decapitation (create favorable conditions for a coup), and military decapitation (targets military capabilities in pursuit of

capitulation). Although Pape focuses primarily on state actors, the strategy is applicable to non-state actors as well.[13]

Advances in air power, precision guided munitions, and special operations forces provide the United States with a significant capability for eliminating terrorist threats and organizations around the globe. The Department of Defense's *Joint Operational Concepts*, dated November 2003, codifies this concept doctrinally by describing the targeting and exploitation of the "adversary's critical nodes, linkages, and vulnerabilities to reduce their centers of gravity" and force them to comply with U.S. will. These capabilities, however, come with a cost. Therefore, policy makers must continually assess if the costs are proportional to their rewards.[14]

## Literature Review

Despite a lack of clarity on the efficacy of the decapitation strategy, counterterrorism strategists continue to place a high priority on leadership targeting. The basis of the argument, according to social network theory, is that charismatic leaders are the critical members of an organization. Organizations with leaders that are both inspirational and operational are the most susceptible to decapitation. The vast majority of literature has been qualitative in nature and focuses on a handful of case studies that tend to support the case for or against the strategy.[15]

Many researchers and analysts within the counterterrorism field believe the decapitation strategy achieves two important short-term goals. First, it eliminates the charismatic leader responsible for galvanizing the organization. Second, a transition between leaders introduces competition for control of the organization, an influx of new

ideas, and potential disillusionment of followers, leading to a subsequent collapse of the organization. Examples such as Israel's targeted killings of Hamas leaders, the killing of al-Qa'ida in Iraq's (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the capture of Abimael Guzmán, the leader of Peru's Shining Path, and the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, a founding member of the Kurdistan Workers Party are examples of decapitation's success. On the other hand, decapitation may not always work as planned. For example, the arrest of Francisco Garmendia (military leader), José Santacristina (political leader), and José Erostarbe (logistical leader) are often cited as the critical blow to the Basque nationalist and separatist organization known as the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), but the organization actually became more violent and remained active for another 18 year following the leader's capture.[16]

The decapitation strategy's ability to achieve short-term goals is not the only point of contention. Advocates of decapitation strikes argue that they eliminate terrorist leaders in non-permissive environments with less civilian casualties and lower costs than the costs associated with a conventional war or occupation. Opponents of decapitation strategy argue that leadership targeting has unintended consequences which include turning leaders into martyrs, expanding publicity for the terrorist organization, boosting recruitment, increasing radicalization, and broadening the base of public support.[17]

## Leadership Targeting and Organizational Collapse

Analysis of the literature reviewed on targeted killings, makes it clear that the decapitation strategy is not the "silver bullet" that most policy makers envision. As the

analysis that follows demonstrates, the majority of the literature portrays the strategy as largely unsuccessful in bringing about organizational collapse within 2 years of the decapitation event. Based on the findings, 30 percent of terrorist organizations will collapse within 2 years of a decapitation event. Although the body of work is largely pessimistic about the efficacy of the decapitation strategy, the author argues that an average organizational collapse rate of one in three provides some optimism and utility for the strategy at the operational and strategic levels. It is clear that the decapitation strategy will not guarantee victory, but it appears that the costs versus rewards may be worth the effort.[18]

Jenna Jordan concludes that terrorist groups that experience a decapitation event collapse 18.6 percent of the time while those that did not experience a decapitation event collapsed 70% of the time. Jordan's results are based on her 2009 quantitative analysis of 298 incidents of leadership targeting across 96 organizations from 1945-2004. Although the data set did not include all terrorist organizations, it included the majority of those active in the 20th century. Jordan divided the organizational leadership into two tiers, the top leader, and members of the upper echelon. She excluded events where organizations removed their leader internally and considered the decapitation attempt a failure if the members of the organization continued to support the cause under a new name. Jordan defined a successful decapitation event if the organization had no activity in the two years following the leader's removal and a failure if the organization remained active, regardless of the activity level.[19]

In a 2004 study by Lisa Langdon, Alexander Sarapu, and Mathew Wells, they found that 25.8 percent of terrorist organizations collapsed following the death or capture of their leader. This insight draws from an assessment of 35 leadership losses on 19 political, social, and separatist groups, of 100 or more members, from 1750 to present. Their work examined whether the group disbanded, grew more or less radicalized, or remained unchanged following a decapitation event. They also looked at why some groups fail and others thrive following the loss of their leader, as well as what happens when a group fails to achieve their stated goal. The authors selected groups where there was either one primary leader or a small group of leaders. They excluded groups that splintered into subgroups where there was no overarching leader. Their definition of a movement was broad and included guerilla, terrorist, religious, and revolutionary groups. According to Langdon, et al., the decapitation strategy resulted in organizational collapse at a rate of one out of every four successful decapitation events.[20]

In Bryan Price's 2009 study, he found that out of the 93 terrorist organizations that collapsed from 1970-2008, 44.9 percent experienced decapitation. The study also indicated that 30 percent (40 organizations) collapsed within 2 years of the decapitation event and that terrorist group mortality was 3.6 to 6.7 times higher for groups that experienced decapitation then those that did not. Price's study included a data set of 207 terrorist groups and focused on how long a terrorist organization remained active after the decapitation of its leader. Price ran three models that included a decapitation effect lasting 1 year, 2 years (correlates with Jordan's research), and indefinitely. Price controlled for the presence of allied and rival terrorist groups, ideology, group size,

structure, counterterrorism capacity, government regime type, and method of decapitation or other forms of leadership turnover. Of significance is that the mean survival of the 131 groups that ended from 1970 to 2008 was 13.9-14.2 years.[21]

Patrick Johnston's 2012 study focused on decapitation outcomes on counterinsurgency campaigns, conflict violence, and insurgent lethality. Johnston's research shows that war termination is 28 percent more likely following a decapitation event and increased the government's chances of campaign success by 30 percent. The data set included 118 decapitation attempts within 90 insurgency campaigns from 1975-2003. Johnston also found that successful decapitation events reduced insurgent attacks and the overall level of violence while providing little evidence of blowback for failed government decapitation attempts. Although Johnston's findings provide optimism for the decapitation strategy as a whole, his data set did not include any Islamic insurgencies.[22]

In 2007, Lieutenant Colonel Randy Shliep used a model developed by Naval Postgraduate School faculty members Michael Freeman and Gordon McCormick in a case study on the killing of al-Qa'ida in Iraq's (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The model, based on a quad diagram, contains an X-axis representing the level of inspiration the leader imparts to the organization and a Y-axis represents the level of operational involvement the leader has within the organization. Freeman and McCormick believe that organizations that rely on a leader who possesses a significant amount of inspirational and operational knowledge are vulnerable to a single decapitation strike. Although Shliep assessed Zarqawi as both the inspirational and operational leader, Zarqawi's death did not collapse AQI.[23]

Advocates of the strategy such as Price and Johnston believe that terrorist leaders are harder to replace because they lead violent, clandestine, and values-based organizations. These groups are more cohesive due to the violence and risk of being a victim themselves. Terrorist organizations rely heavily on charismatic leaders because their illegal activities prevent the use of conventional rules and laws to govern their member's behavior. Price would also argue that values based organizational leaders require unique skill sets, as opposed to profit-based organizations that have a monetary incentive to hold the organization together. Without monetary motivation, values based leaders must provide followers a vision, mission, and strategy that energize the masses towards violent collective action. On the other hand, if a terrorist organization formalizes their processes, they place themselves at risk of capture by the state or a rival group. If they train their subordinates to do their job, they risk removal from power by their own group.[24]

If the advocates of decapitation were correct, then why did AQI continue to exist following Zarqawi's death? The only explanation is that Zarqawi institutionalized both his inspirational and operational roles within the organization, which minimized the impact of his loss. Since Zarqawi was the operational strategist and not the Salafi ideological leader, his removal would only affect the organization if there were no one else able to serve as the operational strategist. In other words, decapitation works if the leader possesses skills no one else has. This may also help explain why 70 percent of terrorist organizations remain active following decapitation events.[25]

Although the literature portrays the decapitation strategy as largely unsuccessful in bringing about organizational collapse within 2 years of the decapitation event, a 30

percent chance of conflict resolution with one single, swift blow is very appealing. Before committing to the decapitation strategy, however, policy makers should understand which organizations are more or less susceptible to the strategy since the rates of success vary widely from statistically insignificant to over 50% depending on the characteristics of the targeted organization.[26]

## Organizational Characteristics and Decapitation Efficacy

The quantitative studies indicate that organizational type and age are the strongest predictors of a decapitation strategy's potential success. The majority of scholars reviewed agree that religious-based terrorist organizations are the most resilient type of terrorist organizations. Religious-based organizations are those organizations predominately motivated by religion or whose goals are predominantly religious in nature. The loss of a single leader has proven ineffective in collapsing religious organizations regardless of whether he/she is an inspirational leader, an operational leader, or both. This finding indicates that the leaders of religious organizations play a different role than leaders in other types of terrorist organizations. These findings also suggest that religious beliefs are the most cohesive beliefs among members of terrorist organizations because the movements rely on several thousand-years-old religious texts. Therefore, while a single individual or group may guide the movement, they are not the true source of the movement's power.[27]

The most important characteristic in determining whether a decapitation strike will be effective depends on the type of organization targeted. Jordan, for example, categorized the terrorist organizations within her study as religious, separatist, and

ideological. Although not all terrorist groups fit cleanly into just one category, it is necessary to categorize organizations to predict group behavior and organizational structure. According to Jordan, religious organizations were the most resilient based on a 5 percent collapse rate following a decapitation event. The decapitation strategy was more effective against separatist groups as reflected with a 10 percent collapse rate following a decapitation event. The decapitation strategy was most effective against ideological groups, such as socialists, Marxists, and Communists, with a 32.77 percent collapse rate following a decapitation event.[28]

Langdon, et al. found that religious groups were the most resilient within their study, as just 11% collapsed following a decapitation event. Separatist and ideological groups, referred to as anti-colonial and revolutionary groups, collapsed at an average rate of 33% following decapitation events.[29] On the other hand, Price found that religious groups collapsed at a rate five times higher than ideological groups, referred to as nationalist groups within his study, following a decapitation event. He also found that 44 percent of religious groups collapsed following decapitation events. Although these findings contradict the majority of research on the topic, the difference is attributable to an incomplete data set that failed to include any Islamic insurgencies post 9/11.[30]

The majority of researchers, however, agree that religious organizations are the most resilient to decapitation events. This finding should concern policy makers since 67 percent of the terrorist organizations on the Department of State's foreign terrorist list are religious-based Islamic extremists and therefore, the most resilient to decapitation events.[31]

The second most important characteristic of a terrorism organization that predicts the potential success of a decapitation strike is the age of the targeted organization. Seventy-five percent of all terrorist organizations in the Global Terrorism Database, between 1970 and 1997, collapsed within their first year of existence.[32] In line with the argument that terrorist organizations become more resilient over time, Jordan found that groups less than 10 years old had the highest collapse rate within her study, at 29.01 percent. She also found that the effect of decapitation on the organization declines significantly for organizations that are more than 20 years old and the chance of organizational collapse for an organization that is more than 40 years old was zero percent.[33] Price also found that the chance of organizational collapse decreases as an organization moves farther away from the decapitation event and becomes near zero at the 20-year mark. Additionally, Price found that the earlier the decapitation event occurs within the terrorist organization's life cycle, the higher the chance of collapse.[34]

These findings suggest that older organizations have more time to decentralize, institute rules and regulations to govern member behavior, grow a more hierarchical structure, and establish succession plans to reduce turmoil following leader turnover. Decentralization prevents a weakened core from affecting local affiliates and weakened local affiliates from affecting the core. Although a hierarchical command structure is traditionally more vulnerable to decapitation attacks, the loss of a senior leader within the U.S. Army, for example, would result in the promotion of the next officer in line. A similar outcome likely would come from a well-established terrorist organization. In other words, hierarchical organizations become less reliant on the individual and more reliant on the system or processes related to discipline, cohesion, and rules within the

command structure, which mitigate the loss of a leader. Conversely, loosely organized and more decentralized command structures are more dependent on individual leaders to motivate and sustain the overall group.[35]

Evidence also suggests that organizations that had endured internal conflict prior to a decapitation event were more resilient. If an organization fractured after the decapitation event, the remaining splinter groups tended to survive at a higher rate than those organizations that never had internal conflict before the decapitation event. Although the literature fails to measure community support as a variable, most analysis recognizes it as an essential component to the survival of any terrorist group because it provides a base for recruits, funding, and other resources.[36]

Based on these findings, age is the second most important characteristic in predicting the decapitation strategy's success against a terrorist organization. This finding should also concern policy makers since the average age of all terrorist organizations on the State Department's foreign terrorist list is 20.44 years. The breakdown by organizational type reveals an average age for religious organizations of 15.5 years and an average age of 31.2 and 36.2 years respectively for separatist and ideological organizations. The average age of religious groups is disproportionately lower due to the recent addition of about a dozen new Islamic Salafism groups added to the FTO list within the past 5 years. Based on age alone, the chance of organizational collapse for three-quarters of those listed as an FTO is just 10 percent.[37]

## Kill vs. Capture

The majority of researchers agree that killing a terrorist leader produces higher rates of organizational collapse over capturing the leader. Jordan's research indicates that killing the terrorist leader led to organizational collapse in 30 percent of the cases as opposed to 21 percent for capture. Langdon, et al. found that killing the leader led to organizational collapse 33 percent of the time as opposed to 18 percent for capture. Mannes found that killing the leader provided a 5 percent greater chance of collapse. Johnston and Price agreed that leader turnover, regardless of the means, produced a higher mortality rate for the organization, but their findings between killing or capturing were statistically insignificant. Jordan is the only researcher that distinguished between the leader and the upper echelon. She assessed that killing the upper echelon collapsed the organization 7 percent of the time while capturing them doubled the collapse rate to 15 percent. Therefore, it is more effective to kill a leader and capture a member of the upper echelon. The logic follows the conventional wisdom that a charismatic leader is invaluable to the organization due to their inspirational or operational type leadership influence whereas the upper echelon are more valuable alive due to the potential intelligence gained from operational level leaders.[38]

## Leadership Targeting and Organizational Degradation

As previously discussed, the decapitation strategy is effective in organizational collapse about 30 percent of the time. In the other 70 percent of the cases, the terrorist organization continues to operate at some level of capacity. In this fourth and final section, the author will use case studies by Jordan, Wilner, and Varden to assess the

decapitation strategy's impact on a terrorist organization's ability to operate and conduct terrorist attacks. The number of attacks, casualties, suicide attacks, success rate, and types of targets attacked are metrics to assess the degree of organizational degradation.

Jordan's analysis included the ETA, Hamas, and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). She assessed that overall terrorist attacks, deaths, and injuries attributed to the ETA from 1987-2006 did not have a consistent effect following six separate decapitation events from 1989-2003. In other words, the number of attacks lacked the consistency necessary to show a trend; however, terrorist attacks did become more deadly in the year following a decapitation event. The analysis of Hamas activities indicates a dramatic increase in the number of attacks against Israeli targets and a reduction in lethality during the Second Intifada. Jordan assessed that Hamas demonstrated significant resilience in the face of Israel's repeated use of the decapitation strategy. In the case of the FARC, there was little correlation between decapitation events and violence.[39]

Alex Wilner conducted a case study of four targeted killings of Taliban leaders in Afghanistan between May 2007 and February 2008. He primarily assessed the Taliban's response in terms of number of terrorist attacks, types of attacks, and success or failure of these attacks before and after the decapitation events. Wilner's findings indicate that the overall number of terrorist attacks (IEDs, small arms, and rocket attacks) increased following a decapitation event while suicide bombings decreased. The reduction in the available pool of suicide bombers suggests that the inspirational leader played an important role in the suicide bomber pipeline. Wilner argued that the

loss of the leader reduced the professional capability of the Taliban as reflected in a 20-35 percent higher failure rate of IEDs, a 29 percent reduction in suicide attacks, and a 5 percent decrease in successful suicide bomber attacks. Although these are promising statistics for advocates of the decapitation strategy, it is important for policy makers to understand that the Taliban shifted their attacks from hard targets (Afghan Army and police forces) to soft targets (civilians, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and government officials) which resulted in more civilian casualties. Although Wilner's sample size is small, the results are extremely insightful for the short-term effects of the decapitation strategy. Wilner's analysis does not provide a long-term assessment of the strategy outside of the 4-6 week period surrounding the decapitation event.[40]

Similar to Wilner, Lieutenant Colonel James Varden, U.S. Air Force, found three trends when comparing Israeli decapitation events and Hamas' attacks during the Second Intifada. First, the number of Hamas attacks increased in frequency following a decapitation event, which suggests that there is a certain level of backlash associated with targeted killings. Second, the number of successful suicide attacks by Hamas dropped by 75 percent. Finally, the lethality of Hamas' attacks dropped from 1.6 to 0.4 fatalities per suicide bombing attack from 2001 to 2004. Varden concludes that the reduction in successful suicide attacks and the reduction of lethality were due to a loss of professionalism because of targeted killings.[41]

The challenge Varden and other counterterrorism strategists have is determining what portion of these effects are attributable to targeted killings and mass arrests and what portion are attributable to the larger military incursions into the West Bank and Gaza since 1988. In other words, the increase in the number of Hamas attacks during

the Second Intifada could be in response to an increase in Israeli operations in general. The reduction in successful suicide attacks may be a result of the loss of bomb makers rather than leaders. A heightened Israeli Defense Force posture coupled with sustained counterterrorism measures could explain the reduction in Israeli casualties. Varden's analysis, therefore, provides mixed and partial results.[42]

Although the results of the decapitation strategy appear mixed at the strategic level, the case studies by both Wilner and Varden provide optimism for decapitation events at the tactical and operational levels. For example, the targeted killing of Mullah Dadullah, the Taliban leader of Pakistan's Bajur tribal area, changed the way the Taliban operated and reduced their freedom to maneuver within Afghanistan. The policies and procedures published by Mullah Omar, the supreme commander and spiritual leader of the Taliban, demonstrate the lengths he was willing to go to avoid the loss of another charismatic leader such as Dadullah. For instance, following Dadullah's death, Mullah Omar directed all Taliban senior leaders within their central command to move to Pakistan to avoid coalition targeting efforts. Omar delegated the organization's military strategy down to lower-level district commanders and utilized shadow governors to maintain situational awareness within Afghanistan while senior Taliban leaders operated from the relative safe haven of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). The Taliban's media wing maintained four separate representatives that utilized the same name in an effort to prevent any one individual from knowing too much while minimizing the impacts to the organization if they were captured or killed.[43]

Dadullah's death demonstrates that not all terrorists are competent terrorists and the pool of quality replacements may not be very deep. In Dadullah's case, for

example, the Taliban chose his brother to replace him based on familial ties rather than his capability. His brother lacked the charisma that Dadullah possessed and the Taliban fired him after a short time in the job. In addition to the limited quantity of quality candidates, there is also the impact of a limited life span that tends to affect a terrorist organization's ability to attract and retain the most qualified leaders.[44]

The Taliban and Hamas case studies illustrate how terrorist organizations are learning and adaptive organizations that resisted decapitation strikes through decentralization and the use of safe havens. The Taliban used the Pakistani FATA following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Hamas exported portions of their leadership structure to safe havens in other countries following the mass arrests of 1988 and 1989. Terrorist organizations adapt their own tactics, techniques, and procedures to survive. The Taliban and Hamas provide us with a model by which targeted killings caused the leaders of terrorist organizations to seek a safe haven to avoid capture or death. The geographic separation forced leaders to delegate responsibility to subordinates. This delegation of authority provided greater depth to the leadership pool and increased the organization's resilience to leadership decapitation.[45]

Although the majority of literature supports the theory that decapitation strikes provide time and space for the more long-term components of a counterterrorism strategy, the Taliban and Hamas case studies illustrate that the second and third order effects may not be as positive. In the case of al-Qa'ida, for example, the U.S. targeting of the organization's core leadership likely resulted in accelerating the decentralization of the Islamic Salafi movement and more autonomy for al-Qa'ida affiliates. Most noteworthy are the affiliates in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Northwest Africa, and Somalia that

have become increasingly violent as they pursue both local and regional objectives. In recent years, affiliates have routinely disobeyed or even disassociated themselves with core Al-Qa'ida as groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) gain international attention through mass executions and violence against civilian populations.[46]

## Conclusion

Targeted killings have been one of the most visible elements of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy for the past 14 years. The efficacy of the strategy itself, however, has received little attention. This paper analyzed and assessed the body of work to determine the effectiveness of targeted killings within the broader U.S. counterterrorism effort. Based on the preponderance of evidence, the literature supports the following findings:

- Terrorist organizations collapse at an average rate of 30 percent following a decapitation event.[47]
- The decapitation strategy is most effective against younger, ideological, or separatist-based organizations.[48]
- The decapitation strategy is least effective against older and more religious-based organizations.[49]
- Killing the leader or capturing the upper echelon leaders produces the highest rates of collapse within terrorist organizations.[50]
- Decapitation events degrade a terrorist organization's ability to operate at the operational and tactical level.[51]

Targeted killings provide a one in three chance of conflict resolution with a single, swift blow, but despite these odds, the decapitation strategy is clearly not a silver bullet. Its potential to end a terrorist organization or buy time for other pieces of the strategy to become relevant depends on the organization targeted. The efficacy of the strategy lies in the understanding of what organizations are more or less susceptible to the strategy as well as the risks versus rewards of acting or failing to act against a known or perceived threat. Decapitation events force terrorist leaders to spend their time hiding and/or running, rather than planning attacks or running their organizations. These effects are far more appealing than the alternative strategies such as the commitment of large-scale ground forces. Therefore, the decapitation strategy is an important component of the broader U.S. counterterrorism and national security strategy.[52]

## Policy Implications

Despite the expenditure of U.S. blood and treasure over the past 14 years, the number of terrorist attacks worldwide rose by 43 percent in 2013. Critics argue that the U.S. counterterrorism strategy has failed due to a heavy reliance on the military and a lack of effort to address the grievances of the Muslim world. Others say that by elevating criminal acts to the level of war, we have provided legitimacy to criminal organizations and increased the flow of recruits to the jihadist movement. There is likely truth to both sides of this policy debate since the United States has won the majority of its battles and killed or captured numerous terrorist leaders since 9/11, but does not appear any closer to winning the so-called “long war.”[53]

Although the broader U.S. counterterrorism strategy is not without faults, the strategy of targeting terrorist leaders does offer the United States considerable benefits.

The resources spent on targeted killings are far less in terms of blood and treasure than those the U.S. would require for an occupation and counter-insurgency campaign. Preemptive strikes against terrorist leaders who pose an imminent threat to U.S. citizens or national interests have enhanced U.S. national security and contributed to the prevention of another large-scale attack on the American homeland, similar to 9/11. The use of precision-guided munitions and drones provide the U.S. with the ability to kill terrorist leaders in non-permissive environments or denied terrain such as the Pakistani FATA or Yemen. The ability to kill or capture terrorist leaders in historical safe havens limits their ability to operate in the open and sustains pressure on the terrorist organization's command and control structure.

Although the United States should retain the decapitation strategy as a component of the broader U.S. counterterrorism strategy, policy makers should exercise caution when implementing the strategy. Unintended consequences such as civilian deaths, decentralization of leadership roles, martyrdom of dead leaders, and an increase in recruits and public support may reduce the strategy's effectiveness. The removal of key leaders, planners, and trainers from the battlefield may have prevented attacks against the U.S. homeland, but what part of this success is due to decapitation events and what part is due to the whole of government approach against terrorism is difficult to know. Would the United States be safer if they would have done nothing following 9/11? These questions are difficult to answer, but what is clear is that the U.S. cannot kill every terrorist and the death of several hundred terrorist leaders has not yet led to victory. Therefore, the U.S. should utilize the decapitation strategy judiciously to provide time and space for our broader counterterrorism strategy to succeed.

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