



Targeted Killings: Is Organizational Decapitation An Effective Counterterrorism Strategy?



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Agenda



- Background
- Research Questions and Methodology
- Terms and Definitions
- Targeted Killings and the Decapitation Strategy
- U.S. National Security and Counterterrorism Strategy
- Analysis
- Conclusion
- Policy Implications
- Questions and Comments

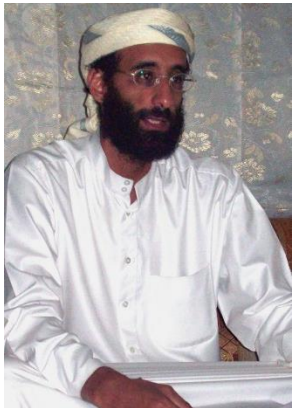


Background



Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

Ibrahim al-Rubaysh



Anwar al-Awlaki



Usama Bin Laden

The number of terrorist attacks rose by 43% worldwide in 2013



Research Questions and Methodology



- Do targeted killings cause terrorist organizations to collapse or become inactive?
- What terrorist organizations are more or less susceptible to the decapitation strategy?
- Is it better to kill or capture the terrorist leader?
- Are terrorist organizations degraded by decapitation events?



Terms and Definitions



- **Terrorism:** Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.
- **Terrorist Groups:** Any group practicing, or which has significant subgroups which practice international terrorism. Grouped by type (religious, separatist, ideological).
- **Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs):** Immigration and Nationality Act, assigns responsibility of designating/maintaining list to State Department.
- **Leadership Targeting and Decapitation:** Operation conducted with the primary purpose of capturing and/or killing the leader of an enemy organization.
- **Decapitation Event:** Capturing or killing of the top leader or top tier of leader(s).
- **High Value Target:** The term high value target (HVT) describes a broad range of targets that are of value and/or possess unique skills to the opposition.



Targeted Killings and the Decapitation Strategy



- **Not a new Strategy:** Sun Tzu was an advocate of targeting the military and political leadership to disrupt or defeat an enemy.
- **Modern Strategists:** According to Robert Pape, 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."** (Leadership, Political, and Military)
- **Desired Effects:**
 - Eliminates charismatic leader responsible for galvanizing the organization.
 - Reduces the enemy's capabilities.
 - Increases the chances of a quick victory.
 - Creates turmoil during succession.
 - Reduces civilian casualties and costs of conventional war or occupation.
 - Leader spends more time hiding than running organization or planning attacks.
- **DoD's Joint Operational Concepts (2003):** Codifies concept doctrinally by describing the targeting and exploitation of the **"adversary's critical nodes, linkages, and vulnerabilities to reduce their centers of gravity."**



U.S. National Security and Counterterrorism Strategy



- **2002 NSS:** “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.”
- **2011 CT Strategy:** “**Whole of government approach.**”
 - Guiding Principles: U.S. core values, building partnerships, applying counterterrorism tools and capabilities appropriately, and building a culture of resilience.
 - Goals: Protect American interests, defeat al-Qa’ida and its affiliates, and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction.
- **2015 NSS:**
 - Strategy shifts away from costly ground wars to a more sustainable, **targeted CT approach.**
 - “We will not hesitate to take **decisive action.**”
 - Credits interagency for bringing “**justice to Osama bin Laden and significantly degrading AQ’s core.**”



Do targeted killings cause terrorist organizations to collapse or become inactivity?



- **No:**
 - Jenna Jordan (2009): **18.6% success rate.**
- **Maybe / Sometimes:**
 - Lisa Langdon, et al. (2004): **25.8% success rate.**
 - Audrey Cronin (2006): **One way to end terrorism.**
 - Aaron Mannes (2008): **Statistically insignificant.**
 - Randy Schliep (2007): **Not successful at collapsing AQI.**
- **Yes:**
 - Bryan Price (2009): **30% success rate; mortality 3.6 to 6.7 times higher collapse rate.**
 - Patrick Johnston (2012): **53% success rate, 28% greater chance of war termination and 30% greater chance of campaign victory.**

Mixed results indicate that the strategy is not a “Silver Bullet.” An average success rate of 30% provides optimism and justifies utility.



What types of terrorist organizations are more or less susceptible to the strategy?



- The two primary predictors are the organization's type and age.
- The decapitation strategy is the most effective against...
 - Separatist-based organizations
 - Ideological-based organizations
 - Younger (<10 years old)
 - Smaller (<100 members)
- The strategy is the least effective against...
 - Religious-based organizations
 - Older (>20 years old)
 - Larger (>500 members)

FTOs: 67% Religious-based;
Average age of 20.44 years old
(Religious 15.5, Separatist 31.2,
and Ideological 36.2 years old)



Is it better to kill or capture the terrorist leader?



- Killing produces higher rates of organizational collapse over capturing the leader.
- Capturing the upper echelon doubled the collapse rate over killing the upper echelon.
- The upper echelon are more valuable alive due to the potential intelligence gained from operational level leaders.



Are terrorist organizations degraded by decapitation events?



- Jenna Jordan:
 - ETA – Inconsistent results.
 - Hamas (Second Intifada) – Increase in violence after a decapitation event.
 - FARC – Inconsistent results.
- Alex Wilner (Taliban):
 - 20-35 percent higher failure rate of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED).
 - 29 percent reduction in suicide attacks.
 - 5 percent decrease in successful suicide bomber attacks.
 - Increased number of attacks that shifted from hard to soft targets.
- James Varden (Hamas; Second Intifada):
 - Hamas attacks increased in frequency following a decapitation event.
 - Hamas suicide attacks and fatalities decreased by 75 percent.
- Mullah Dadullah (Taliban Commander) Case Study:
 - Quality and quantity of leadership pool.
 - Psychological effects.

Buys time and space for other more long-term counterterrorism measures.



Conclusions



Targeted Killings:

- Enhance national security (preemptive attacks on imminent threats)
- Support no or limited “boots on the ground”
- Minimize casualties (military/civilian)
- Lower financial costs
- Enhances citizen’s perception of action and increased security
- Avoids the detention dilemma
- Denies safe havens (non-permissive or denied terrain)
- Sustains pressure on the terrorist network



Policy Implications



Unintended Consequences:

- Martyrdom of terrorist leaders
- Publicity and legitimacy for the terrorist organization (recruits)
- Kill when we should have captured (Signature Strikes)
- Creation of more terrorists as a result of civilian casualties
- Elevate criminal acts to an act of war
- Decentralization of leadership roles
- Oversight and approval authorities



Questions and Comments?



As of November 24, 2014: 41 men targeted and 1,147 people killed in Pakistan

Source – theguardian.com

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