Targeted Killings: Is Organizational Decapitation An Effective Counterterrorism Strategy?

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• Research Questions and Methodology
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• Targeted Killings and the Decapitation Strategy
• U.S. National Security and Counterterrorism Strategy
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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:**

• **Maybe / Sometimes:**
  – Audrey Cronin (2006): One way to end terrorism.
  – 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
As of November 24, 2014: 41 men targeted and 1,147 people killed in Pakistan

Source – theguardian.com