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14. ABSTRACT Decapitation of the leadership hierarchies of terrorist, insurgent, and even criminal organizations has become a widely used and accepted tool to defeat them. Historical cases can be used by both supporters and critics of decapitation to support each respective argument. This paper examines several historical cases to test two opposing hypotheses regarding the efficacy of decapitation. The nature of the targeted organization greatly influences the potential effectiveness of decapitation.					
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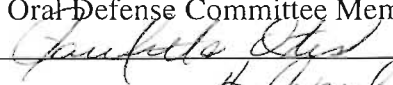
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Executive Summary

Title: Consequences of Decapitation Policies

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Hypothesis 1: Leadership targeting is effective at defeating subversive groups when the targeted group is reliant on charismatic and/or individualistic leadership or ideology for identity and direction.

Hypothesis 2: Leadership targeting used against ethnic or nationalist based groups with political aspirations provides short-term tactical success without leading to overall long-term strategic success.

Discussion: The use of leadership targeting operations has been central to many counter-insurgent and counter-terror campaigns by conducted all over the world. The common justification is based on the notion that a group cannot survive significant losses of leadership. Even when replacements are available and anticipated, proponents of leadership targeting argue that sustained operations will eventually exhaust the available pool of replacements, leading to the demise of the targeted group. However, a definitive judgment as to the effectiveness of leadership targeting is elusive since the results of its employment in historical cases vary.

Conclusion: Both hypotheses are supported by the cases studied. When targeted groups are reliant on individualistic leadership or ideology, the removal of leaders can be effective. However, when targeted groups have nationalistic goals, the effects of leadership targeting tend to be more short-term in nature.

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Preface

A casual observer of U.S. counter-insurgency and counter-terror operations cannot miss the central role played by leadership targeting operations. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we all anticipated the impending death or capture of Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader held responsible. With President George W. Bush's "you are with us or against us" policy, we also saw the leaders of groups like the Taliban join the list of targets. Although it took almost ten years to locate and ultimately kill bin Laden, the passing years saw countless Taliban leaders, from the highest to the lowest levels, captured or killed. So why then does the Taliban continue to conduct insurgent operations against coalition forces?

I realize the problems faced are extremely complex, but I set out to examine the role played by leadership targeting in the long U.S. and coalition efforts in Afghanistan. To this end, I examined several historical cases involving the use of leadership targeting. I found that views on the subject are varied. Cases exist to support both opposing and supporting views. Comparisons are difficult among cases, since each outcome is affected by unique circumstances. I would like to thank Dr. Pauletta Otis for assisting me with making sense of such a varied set of historical examples to support my analysis.

Introduction

On May 1, 2011 in the East Room of the White House, President Barack Obama announced the success of a “targeted operation” launched against a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan resulting in the death of Osama bin Laden. The President described the event as “the most significant achievement to date in our nation’s effort to defeat al-Qaeda.” After all, shortly after taking office, the President made the capture or killing of Bin Laden the top priority for the CIA director, Leon Panetta. The President’s remarks characterized the event as a milestone, or a measure of progress in the decades long struggle to bring Bin Laden to justice.¹

For the United States, targeting the leaders of terrorist groups has become an overt matter of national policy. In 2002, the United States used a Predator Drone strike in Yemen to kill Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi, the suspected al-Qaeda mastermind of the October 2000 attack on the *USS Cole*. Since then, the use of drone strikes and direct action missions such as the one on bin Laden’s compound in 2011, have continued as important elements of U.S. counter terror and counter insurgency operations.

Many countries have employed the concept of decapitation against subversive violent terrorist, insurgent, and criminal organizations all over the world for decades. As public scrutiny over these types of operations has increased with the level of media exposure, a debate has emerged which challenges the legitimacy and efficacy of decapitation. Both proponents and critics have a litany of historical examples to substantiate opposing views.

The problem is that each case is unique. The context and sociological dynamics of the targeted groups have as much or more to do with outcomes as the use of

decapitation as a way to defeat them. This paper will discuss not whether or not decapitation is effective, but instead what factors or considerations influenced efficacy.

To this end, this paper will consider:

- Hypothesis 1: Decapitation is effective at defeating subversive groups when the targeted group is reliant on charismatic and/or individualistic leadership or ideology for identity and direction.
- Hypothesis 2: Decapitation used against ethnic or nationalist based groups with political aspirations provides short-term tactical success without leading to overall long-term strategic success.

Terms and Their Meanings

There are a variety of terms used to describe the concept of targeting the leadership of an adversarial organization in order to defeat it. The terms used have differing legal and ethical connotations. Nils Melzer (2008) organizes a list of these terms with the purpose of finding one that can be considered objectively without prejudiced wording. For example, on the non-technical end of the spectrum, words like ‘liquidation,’ ‘neutralization,’ ‘elimination,’ or ‘interception’ lack “precise definitional contours” and “indicate political preferences” according to Melzer (2008). Terms with a more technical legal connotation include ‘extrajudicial executions,’ ‘extrajudicial killings,’ ‘extrajudicial punishments,’ or ‘assassinations.’ These terms tend to indicate unlawful conduct, and are more frequently used by critics.²

Although Melzer (2008) ultimately settles on the term ‘targeted killing’ as the most precise and objectively neutral, Kronin (2009) provides a slightly more useful term

for the purpose of this paper. Kronin (2009) uses the term ‘decapitation’ to refer to the “catching or killing of a leader.”³ Although the two acts are used interchangeably in the media and by government leaders when referring to “capture/kill” scenarios, the two acts have different implications for realizing effects on an organization. After all, far more intelligence is available from a live terrorist or insurgent than a dead one.

Executive Orders

The importance of terms is perhaps best represented by consideration of the law. In 1975 President Gerald Ford issued Executive Order 11905 which banned assassinations. Executive Order 11905 stipulated, “no employee of the United States government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in political assassination.” This ban was clarified by later administrations. President Jimmy Carter removed the term ‘political’ in his Executive Order 12306. President Ronald Reagan added a section which referred to ‘indirect participation.’ According to Reagan’s new section, “no agency of the Intelligence Community shall participate in or request any person to undertake activities forbidden by [Executive Order 12333].” Although, the Reagan administration adopted a narrow interpretation of the prohibition. In their view, the 1986 air strike on Libya, in which Mohammar Qaddafi was a clear target, was “fully consistent with the Executive Order.”⁴

The Libyan airstrike was a retaliatory bombing raid in response to the April 5, 1986 bombing of a West Berlin nightclub in which two US servicemen and a Turkish woman were killed. The Libyan government was blamed by the US for the attack. Although some criticized the attack as violating the prohibition on assassinations, the US

Army Judge Advocate General provided legal backing with the conclusion that if the attack on Libya was considered part of an armed conflict, then the targeting of military leaders was not prohibited.⁵ Further, regarding terrorism, the JAG concluded that “the use of military force in peacetime against a known terrorist or terrorist organization...is a legitimate exercise of the international right of self-defense and does not constitute assassination.”⁶

International Law

International law does not expressly prohibit targeted killings. Instead it provides two separate normative paradigms in which to consider lawfulness. According to Melzer (2008) the first paradigm is the international normative paradigm of law enforcement and requires State-sponsored targeted killings to abide by all of the following cumulative criteria:

- The state must have “sufficient legal basis in domestic law, which regulates the use of lethal force in accordance” this international normative paradigm.
- The targeted killing must be preventative in nature rather than punitive.
- The purpose of the targeted killing must “aim exclusively” at the protection of human life from “unlawful attack.”
- The targeted killing must be “absolutely necessary in qualitative, quantitative, and temporal terms for the achievement” of protection of human life.
- Targeted killing must be the last recourse of a planned operation. In other words, the aim should be to capture first, and kill only when absolutely necessary.

The second paradigm is the international normative paradigm of hostilities. To be lawful under this paradigm, the targeted killing must abide by the following criteria:

- The targeted killing must “constitute an integral part of the conduct of hostilities in a situation of international” or domestic armed conflict.
- The targeted killing must “be likely to contribute effectively to the achievement of a concrete and direct military advantage” without a reasonable non-lethal alternative.
- The targeted killing must not be directed against an individual lawfully protected from attack.
- The targeted killing must not be likely to cause “incidental death, injury or destruction on persons and objects protected against attack that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.”
- The targeted killing must be planned and conducted to minimize collateral injury or death inflicted “on persons or objects protected against attack.”
- If the targeted individual surrenders or becomes otherwise incapacitated, “regardless of the practicability of capture and evacuation,” the targeted killing must not be executed.
- Forces disguised as non-combatants must not execute the targeted killing.
- The targeted killing must not be conducted with “poison, expanding bullets, or other prohibited weapons” under the restrictions of International Humanitarian Law on booby-traps and other devices.

Both normative paradigms place targeted killings at the extreme end of available alternatives.

Transnational terrorist organizations and insurgents operating without uniforms in clandestine operations pose a significant challenge for lawful actions by both law enforcement and military forces. Melzer (2008) suggests that the frustration associated with showing progress in a “struggle against” such “an elusive opponent,” can drive governments to rely on targeted killings.⁷

Although the strict legality of decapitation is debatable according to international law, the practice has gained legitimacy among governments conducting counter-terror and counter-insurgency operations. With little perceived alternatives, more governments are turning to decapitation to gain momentum in defeating subversive groups. To focus on efficacy, this paper will assume legitimacy for decapitation operations in each of the following case studies.

Case Studies

Peru—Sendero Luminoso

In the early 1960s, Manuel Ruben Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, known as “Guzmán,” was a charismatic philosophy professor at the National University of San Cristobal de Huamanga in Ayachuco, Peru. One perception is that leveraging a student population that came from an extremely poor and underdeveloped region of Peru, Guzmán began to radicalize supporters for a powerful Marxist movement. Guzmán called his movement ‘Sendero Luminoso’ or in English, ‘The Shining Path.’ The Shining Path grew and was responsible for the deaths of 69,000 people over the course of a 20 year campaign of violence.⁸

The Shining Path's first major attacks on the Peruvian government included ballot box burning during the 1980 presidential election. This election was the first one in 17 years, marking the end of a "turbulent tradition of military government." Just as Peru was enjoying extensive land reforms and restoration of democracy, Guzmán's Shining Path was beginning violent revolutionary operations. As Shining Path grew, Guzmán consolidated power by aggressively seeking out dissenters within the organization. These dissenters were either expelled or more often, executed.⁹

Known to his supports as President Gonzalo, Guzmán enjoyed their unquestioned obedience. Guzmán spent 17 years developing an elaborate philosophy based on Marxist-Leninist theory in the context of Peru. He established clear moral codes, rote memorization, and simplified explanations for every revolutionary act.¹⁰ Shortly after beginning the movement, Guzmán went underground to avoid capture. However, though removed from the public view he continued to build a "cult of omnipotence" staging symbolically timed blackouts in the Peruvian capital, and a huge light-display of the iconic hammer and sickle to commemorate his own birthday.¹¹

The Shining Path had a complex tiered membership structure. New members served as sympathizers before advancing to the ranks of activists, then militants, then commanders, and finally central committee members.¹² Throughout the Peruvian campaign to defeat Shining Path, the government repeatedly claimed to have crippled Shining Path by capturing "Guzmán's key lieutenants."¹³ However, new militants quickly filled empty positions and Shining Path operations continued with little interruption. This led to a belief among some experts that Shining Path's structure was so well organized with depth of leadership, that Guzmán's capture or death would not result

in significant impact.¹⁴ There was however, another facet of the Shining Path hierarchy that would prove material to the question of removing Guzmán. New members were required to write letters of subjugation, pledging their lives to both the cause and to Guzmán himself.¹⁵

On September 12, 1992, the Peruvian government captured Guzmán during a raid on a meeting of the Shining Path Central Committee. Along with Guzmán, the Peruvians captured much of the top leadership and seized computer disks containing records of membership and financial resources. Captured alive, Guzmán was put on display by the Peruvian government in a cage, wearing a striped uniform, repudiating his beliefs and asking Shining Path members to lay down their arms.¹⁶ Oscar Ramirez Duran, known as Feliciano, attempted to replace Guzmán as the leader of Shining Path. However, in Guzmán's absence factions arose and the numbers active members and passive supporters dwindled. This trend was bolstered by an offer of amnesty from the Peruvian government.¹⁷ Guzmán's trial by military court was conducted in full view of the media, and he was ultimately sentenced to life in prison.¹⁸

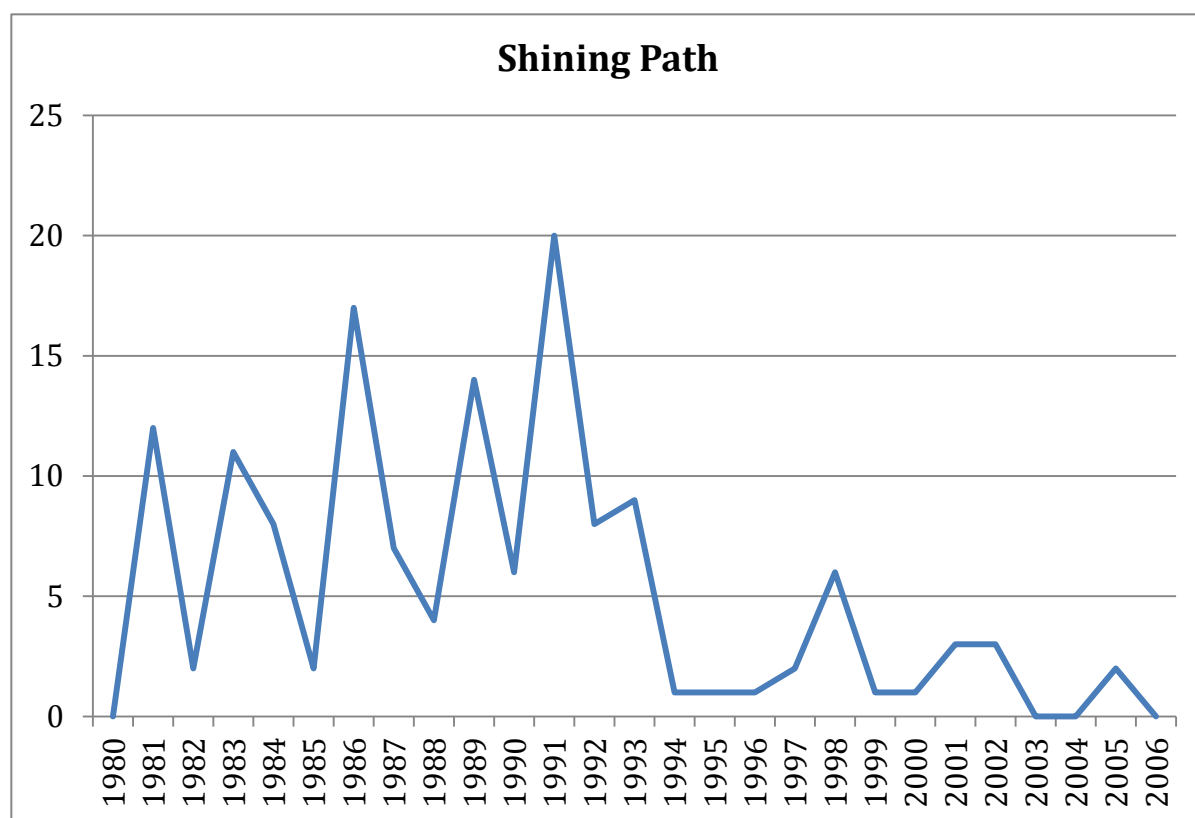


Figure 1: Number of Shining Path Incidents Per Year 1980-2006

Sources: Audrey K. Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Over the short term, violent attacks by Shining Path declined by half within the first year after Guzmán's capture in 1992 (see Figure 1 above). Attacks continued to decline in subsequent years.¹⁹ Although small numbers of Shining Path followers remain in existence, the movement has never revived itself as an ideological organization. Nor has Shining Path presented the same existential threat to the Peruvian government. The long-term effect of removing Guzmán from Shining Path supports Hypothesis 1.

Guzmán was a charismatic leader with an established cult of personality formed around his own ideology. Upon his removal and public portrayal as a criminal rather than as a martyred political figure, the Shining Path fractured and broke apart.

Rhodesia—ZAPU and ZANU Insurgency

Following the Suez crisis of 1956, Great Britain began granting independence to its African colonies. However, independence was only granted after each colony passed legislation to assure political power would rest with the indigenous majority populations. Unlike the other colonies, Rhodesia had a constitution in place that gave it control over domestic affairs. Great Britain only had the power to influence matters that dealt with other foreign states. Consequently, Britain refused to grant independence to Rhodesia since the white minority Rhodesian government would not transfer power. In 1965, talks between Britain and Rhodesia stalled and the Rhodesian government declared independence from Great Britain.²⁰

Within Rhodesia two nationalist groups, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), began a rural guerrilla insurgency. Initially, the ZAPU and ZANU adopted similar strategies. They intended to use violence and unrest in Rhodesia to force a military response from Britain and other western countries and thus, pave the way for a shift to black majority rule. With training, weapons, and equipment provided by several communist countries, the ZAPU and ZANU began infiltrating armed groups into Rhodesia and Zambia to establish bases in remote areas. However, Rhodesian military and security forces were able to intercept these groups before they could launch attacks. The ZANU quickly adapted and withdrew forces for retraining by Chinese advisors in Maoist guerrilla warfare techniques.²¹

Rhodesian military and security forces conducted COIN operations against the ZANU and ZAPU from 1966-1980. One of the major components of the Rhodesian COIN strategy included the capture, kidnapping, and killing of insurgent leaders and

political officials. These operations were primarily carried out by special operations forces who used small team tactics to gather intelligence and locate and track specific guerrilla groups and leadership cadres. These SOF units were able to infiltrate rebel groups and target high value leadership cadres. Often, the SOF units would make it look like other rebels had killed rebel leaders, sowing disharmony between insurgent groups and the population.²²

In spite of the tactical successes of the Rhodesian COIN forces, rebel groups were able to replace lost leaders, filling their ranks from the native majority population. Short-term benefits were often realized from successful decapitation missions. Rebel groups would have to withdraw to safe havens across borders to regroup. Ultimately however, the Rhodesian government failed to stitch together a coherent national COIN strategy. While SOF units won tactical victories, the government neglected opportunities to bolster tactical successes with civic action. In 1980, the rebel leader, Robert Mugabe, won electoral victory and became Prime Minister.²³

Clearly, the Rhodesian example supports Hypothesis 2. Numerous tactical successes in removing key insurgent leaders provided only short-term gains. Ultimately, the insurgent nationalist movement gained legitimate representation and control over the Rhodesian government.

Russia—Chechen Guerillas

For over two decades, Russian forces have been engaged with Chechen guerrillas in an ongoing struggle that has involved significant decapitation efforts. What began as a nationalist and separatist confrontation, by the late 1990s evolved into an ideological, regional, and international conflict.²⁴ Since 2000, Russia has openly intensified

decapitation efforts to counter Chechen use of terror tactics. Cronin (2009) asserts that Russian decapitation efforts have become characterized by levels of “brutality and gruesomeness” matched only by the Chechen rebels themselves.²⁵

Leaders have been targeted on both sides of the conflict. Chechen militants have targeted Kremlin supported leaders in Chechnya. The Russians have responded with a never-ending string of poisonings, bombings, kidnappings, and shootings. Chechen militants continue to replace lost leaders. Over the years, Chechen militants became more reliant on external Islamic support for resources and manpower to fight Russia. As a result, the Chechen movement has become radicalized.²⁶

In spite of numerous tactical successes on the part of the Russians, Chechen operatives continue to trouble Russia with terror attacks. As pointed out by Cronin (2009), although there was a decline in attacks after 2004, the “bloodshed” continues and the movement has spread into the broader Caucasus region.²⁷ Therefore, the Chechen example is supportive of Hypothesis 2. Although the Chechen movement has become more “radicalized,” its ethnic foundations have given it longevity in the face of Russia’s successful decapitation operations.

Israel—Palestinians

The state of Israel has made extensive use of targeted killings in attempts to defeat both state and non-state threats. Early in the 1950s, Israel conducted secret assassinations of Egyptian intelligence officers; in the 1960s, German scientists were targeted to prevent the development of missiles for Egypt; after the September 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, Israeli prime minister Golda Meir launched Operation Wrath of God. This operation was a secret program to kill those responsible for

participating in or planning the massacre.²⁸ Operation Wrath of God went on for 20 years and resulted in the deaths of approximately two dozen alleged Black September operatives and Palestine Liberation Organization planners.²⁹

In the 1980s and 1990s Israel used the same assassination policies against Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders.³⁰ With the turn of the century Israel stepped up both the tempo and the overt nature of its targeted killing policy. In October 2000, the Israelis began a declared state policy of targeted killings in response to the outbreak of the second, “al-Aqsa” intifada. This more widespread assassination strategy began with the military wings of terrorist organizations like Hamas, but then extended to include political leadership as well. The Israeli leadership intended to use the new policy to reduce civilian casualties and avoid the international “condemnation” it received during the Israeli crackdown in the first intifada. In their view, focusing attacks at specific individuals demonstrated a more discriminate use of military force. According to B’Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, between 2000 and 2008, 232 Palestinians were the objects of targeted killings. Additionally, 384 Palestinian civilians were killed unintentionally during the targeted killings.³¹

Because of the both its controversial nature and the availability of data, the international community has scrutinized Israel’s targeted killing policy. It would seem the Israeli experience with targeted killing could provide some context for a meaningful assessment of efficacy for such a policy. Unfortunately however, consensus as to the overall effectiveness of targeted killing remains unattainable. On one side, proponents argue that targeted killings keep terrorist leaders “on the run.” Living in fear, reduces their ability to both plan and carry out attacks. Also, skilled operatives such as bomb

makers are difficult to replace, further stifling terrorist activities. Another benefit is that political leaders can rely on the public spectacle of targeted killings to respond to domestic pressure for action. Audrey Cronin (2009) points out that while some point to a “drop-off in the frequency and lethality of terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians,” it is impossible to determine the degree to which the outcome is the result of targeted killings, or other defensive measures such as walls and border fences.³²

On the other side of the efficacy debate, opponents point out that targeted killings have resulted in martyr status for targeted Palestinians. Consequently, fresh recruits are drawn to the Palestinian cause. Kaplan et al (2005) assert that targeted killing has led to an increase in suicide bombers. Suicide bombs require less technical acumen than more sophisticated types of bombs.³³ Mannes (2008) even suggests that the Israeli targeted killing policy has resulted in surges of violent attacks by Palestinians.³⁴ The Palestinian civilian casualties have reduced the influence of moderates and undermined “the emergence of the healthy social and economic infrastructures necessary for a civil society.”³⁵

After more than a decade of the Israeli targeted killing policy, there has not been a substantial change in the dynamics of the conflict. Ultimately, the Israeli-Palestinian case supports Hypothesis 2. Based on a nationalist desire for an independent Palestinian state, the Palestinians have endured through many years of Israeli operations directed against Palestinian leaders.

Philippines—Abu Sayyaf

In the Philippines in the early 1990s, the political extremist group, Abu Sayyaf split from the larger Moro National Liberation Front. Abu Sayyaf’s leader, Abdurajak

Abubakar Janjalani, fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan and was a “charismatic Islamic scholar.”³⁶ In December 1998, Janjalani and his deputy, Edwin Angeles were killed by Philippine police. Janjalani’s younger brother, Khadaffy Janjalani, stepped up to fill his brother’s position at the head of Abu Sayyaf. However, the younger brother did not have the same organizational skills or charisma with his subordinates. Also, the elder Janjalani had been able to gain training and funding through a close relationship with Osama bin Laden’s brother-in-law, Mahamed Jamal Khalifa.³⁷ In the absence of the elder’s skills and resources, Abu Sayyaf split into three loosely connected splinter groups. Abu Sayyaf’s political agenda was replaced by criminal greed and it became a criminal organization.³⁸ From 2000 to 2003, Abu Sayyaf conducted numerous kidnappings of tourists to collect large ransoms. In one case, Mu’ammar Gadhafi of Libya, paid out millions of dollars in ransom for the release of foreign hostages. Abu Sayyaf used these large payments to secure a fleet of high speed boats and arms for use in its drug trafficking and kidnapping operations.³⁹

In 2002, another prominent Abu Sayyaf leader, Abu Sabaya, was killed. Sabaya planned the 2001 kidnapping of American missionaries Gracia and Martin Burnham. A year later, another important competitor for leadership, Ghalib Andang, was captured by Philippine police forces. Recently, successful operations targeting Abu Sayyaf leadership include the 2010 killing of Albader Parad, one of Abu Sayyaf’s most violent sub-commanders, and the 2012 killing of Gumbahall Jumdail, a senior Abu Sayyaf leader. In spite of the losses in Abu Sayyaf leadership, the group has continued to conduct terrorist operations both for financial profit and to promote a jihadist agenda.⁴⁰

In consideration of Abu Sayyaf's original political extremist nature, the case seems to support Hypothesis 2. Although Abu Sayyaf's original leader, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, was a 'charismatic leader' with significant connections to ideological groups like al-Qaeda, the movement itself was politically based. The support for the Hypothesis must be qualified with the caveats that the character of Abu Sayyaf has morphed into a profit seeking criminal organization with some ideological jihadist influences.

US—al-Qaeda and the Taliban

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States, two distinct groups became the targets a U.S. response. The first group, al-Qaeda, was held directly responsible for the planning and execution of the attacks. The second group, the Taliban, was the ruling body in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban did not seem to have advance knowledge of the September 11 attacks, their perceived protection of Osama bin Laden gave the U.S. justification for lumping the Taliban with al-Qaeda.⁴¹ Since 2001, decapitation has been at the core of military operations directed at al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Navy Rear Admiral John D. Stufflebeem's statements to reporters during a November 28, 2001 Pentagon news briefing demonstrate the importance of decapitation to American military planners. He said, "if we break the leadership of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, there's [a] reduced motivation for troops to stay loyal to the cause and continue to fight. Therefore, the pressure is on that leadership."⁴²

As of this writing, the U.S. and its allies and partners have a long list of successfully eliminated or captured al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. Most notably for al-Qaeda, President Barack Obama announced on May 1, 2011 a successful operation

conducted by SEAL Team Six that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden. Due to successful decapitation operations conducted against the Taliban, senior leaders like Mullah Mohammad Omar, the one time head of the Taliban, are now in detention. Other Taliban leaders that are now dead or in custody range from the highest to the lowest levels of the Taliban hierarchy.

However, the effects of successful decapitation operations on each group vary significantly. In June 2011, President Barack Obama announced a substantial drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. He characterized the move as one made from a “position of strength,” citing the “enormous strain” on al-Qaeda brought on by successful decapitation operations. To support this line of logic, the President revealed intelligence collected from Osama bin Laden’s compound a month earlier. The intelligence described bin Laden’s “concern that al-Qaeda had been unable to effectively replace senior terrorists that had been killed.”⁴³

Al-Qaeda faces a different challenge than the Taliban in replacing killed or captured leaders. As a non-native ideological based group in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qaeda must pull from a much narrower group of prospective leaders than the Taliban. Al-Qaeda plots of terror tend to be more intricate and require more planning and higher levels of skill to execute. In contrast, Taliban operations tend to favor more generic guerrilla tactics requiring the most basic fighting skills that are common among the local Afghanistan tribesmen. This has enabled the Taliban to replace lost leaders quite easily when compared to al-Qaeda. Qari Yousef Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, remarked that “the Taliban [does not] care if someone is knowledgeable and educated,” but instead they

only “look at who is a good fighter.” Ahmadi also claims Taliban recruiting efforts have been bolstered by civilian casualties resulting from coalition attacks.⁴⁴

Although the Taliban has filled leadership vacancies comparatively easily, the changes in leadership have still had appreciable effects on the Taliban. The older generations that filled Taliban leadership positions before the attacks of September 11, 2001 have been replaced by much younger fighters with very little memory of Afghan society from before the Soviet war in the 1980s. Linschoten and Kuehn (2011) posit that older generations held more “pragmatic” views in keeping with nationalistic ideals, while younger leaders tend to be more ideologically focused.⁴⁵ According to Linschoten and Kuehn, the result is the Taliban has become more radicalized and its leaders are now more receptive to al-Qaeda’s advances.⁴⁶

Successful decapitation operations against the Taliban have greatly affected the ability of Taliban leaders to maintain central control of the insurgency. Consequently, Taliban leaders are only able to control disparate segments at any one time. Although some might view this as a positive effect, the lack of centralized control increases the Taliban’s susceptibility to infiltration and manipulation by groups such as al-Qaeda.⁴⁷

The use of decapitation by the U.S. against the Taliban and al-Qaeda provides two distinct cases occurring simultaneously. In the case of al-Qaeda, the current trend supports Hypothesis 1. The ideologically based al-Qaeda has had trouble replacing lost leaders. The Taliban case however, supports Hypothesis 2. In spite of significant losses of leaders at all levels in the Taliban hierarchy, the nationalist underpinnings of the Taliban group have allowed it to survive. However, as in the Chechen case, the Taliban is becoming more radicalized under newer leaders.

Conclusions

Both proponents and opponents of decapitation as a means to defeat violent extremist groups can point to historical examples that support each respective claim. However, fundamental problems remain with establishing definitive assessments of efficacy. The dynamics involved with each historical example are unique. The strategies used by the belligerents involved have as many differences as similarities. Most decapitation or targeted killing strategies have been quite secretive, reducing the availability of data from which to draw conclusions.

Although the Israeli case, particularly the experiences after the turn of the century, has provided more measurable data, there are still widely varied opinions as to the results. Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Palestinian groups continue to operate and have not been wholly undermined by the Israeli targeted killing policy. Cronin (2009) even asserts that the policy has in fact legitimized terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians in response to the resulting “culture of martyrdom.”⁴⁸

Though the Russians succeeded in hunting down numerous Chechen leaders, anti-state violence continued to spread to Dagestan, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia. Smaller groups such as Abu Sayyaf, have been more affected organizationally by decapitation strategies. After the death of its primary leader, Abu Sayyaf evolved from a violent political group to a largely criminal organization with loose affiliations to jihadist groups. However, in the case of Abu Sayyaf, evolution has not meant reduction in violence. Abu Sayyaf continues to use terrorism as a tool for both profit and an increasingly jihadist agenda.

Finally, U.S. experiences with the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan provide a unique opportunity to compare the simultaneous effects on two distinct groups with the broad-brushed application of decapitation by coalition forces. In the case of al-Qaeda, the removal of key leaders and planners in the organization has hindered al-Qaeda's ability to plan and execute attacks against U.S. and coalition forces. As an ideologically based group, al-Qaeda must draw from a relatively small pool of potential replacements that share the same ideology. Conversely, the Taliban has a vast indigenous population with the basic military skills required to support their guerrilla-based insurgency. The difference in the effects realized by the U.S. application of decapitation against both groups points to a failure on the part of the U.S. to recognize differences in the dynamics of each group.

The use of decapitation to defeat subversive groups can be a seductive strategy for employment. Although decapitation has historically required direct action units to close with targets for capture or killing, contemporary applications involve the use of drone strikes, requiring less risk to personnel. However, the cases presented above support both Hypotheses, suggesting the use of decapitation must be applied judiciously. The ends, ways, and means of the targeted group must be considered carefully to make a reasonable prediction about the effects of a decapitation strategy. Each group should be considered a living organism. Faced with the loss of leaders, the group will adapt within the context of the circumstances faced. Although predictions can never be absolute, chances for favorable outcomes increase as the unique dynamics of the targeted group are more carefully considered.

End Notes

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- ⁶ Jeffrey T Richelson, “When Kindness Fails: Assassination as a National Security Option.” In *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, (2002): 245.
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