FANNING THE FLAMES?: TARGETED KILLINGS AND THE ATTACK PREFERENCES OF ISLAMIST TERRORIST-INSURGENT GROUPS

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FANNING THE FLAMES?: TARGETED KILLINGS AND THE ATTACK PREFERENCES OF ISLAMIST TERRORIST-INSURGENT GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between military repression used against Islamist terrorist-insurgents groups and those groups’ strategic targeting preferences. Specifically, it uses a case study analysis to examine whether the initiation of a bombing and missile strike campaign against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was associated with that group focusing its attacks on Yemeni or U.S. civilians, on Yemeni security services, or on other targets. Relying on information from public sources, the study uses data on fourteen attacks conducted by AQAP between January 2009 and December 17, 2009 (before initiation of the government targeting campaign) and between December 18, 2009 and October 2010 (from the campaign’s initiation to present) to determine whether military pressure was associated with a change in AQAP targeting patterns. The study’s findings suggest that after military pressure was initiated in December 2009, al Qaeda attacks increased against the Yemeni security services and the U.S. civilians, but did not increase against Yemeni civilians.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way.

Many thanks,
Germain M. Difo
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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between use of military force against Islamist terrorist-insurgent groups and changes in those groups’ strategic targeting preferences. Specifically it evaluates the degree to which counter-terrorists’ application of military force is associated with increases in attacks against civilian non-combatants or government security forces. To accomplish this, the paper uses a case study approach to assess whether the Yemeni and U.S. governments’ use of bombing and missile strikes against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in December 2010 and afterward has corresponded with change in AQAP’s attack targets.

Making this assessment is important for two reasons. First, there has recently been considerable debate regarding the costs and benefits of using direct and indirect military force as a tool to counter Islamist terrorist-insurgent groups, with AQAP being one of the central topics of that debate.1 Assessing whether and to what extent military pressure on AQAP is likely to change its behavior and the focus of its attacks is therefore of clear relevance to policymakers. Second, with few exceptions2 much of the literature regarding the relationship between use of military force and terrorist groups’ attack patterns, particularly with respect to targeted killings, is restricted to examining Israel’s use of targeted killings against locally-focused Palestinian terrorist groups.3 Expanding that sort of analysis to groups with both a global and international focus can contribute considerably to the discipline.

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Chapter II: Military Force and Terrorist Targeting

Military Force and Retaliation in Counterterrorism

Counterterrorism experts have long suggested that military force is at once one of the most potent tools in the counterterrorist’s toolbox and one of the most difficult to effectively employ. This is in part because it is difficult to determine how, whether, and when terrorist groups are likely to be vulnerable to the force being employed. It is also, however, due the fact that more so than with a number of other “soft” counterterrorism tools, when employing military force the associated costs tend to be extraordinarily high.

Though these costs can be many and varied, one in particular, terrorist retaliation against civilian non-combatants, stands out in the literature as being one of the most significant. Several authors have noted that one of the major difficulties inherent to using force in counterterrorism is the fact that terrorist groups sometimes respond by going on the offensive; when pressured terrorist groups sometimes prove willing and able to respond with acts of terrorist violence against civilians.

In his survey of the range of tools at a counterterrorist’s disposal, Paul Pillar suggests that military force, despite being an inherently blunt instrument, can potentially deliver a number of significant benefits. He notes that retaliating against terrorist groups by striking their facilities and infrastructure, one of the most important uses of military force before the September 11th attacks, has historically served as number of important functions, including giving state governments a means by which to demonstrate that they are doing something to punish terrorist

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5 Ibid.
6 Pillar, 99-100; Hoyt, 164-176.
violence and protect their citizens. Force can also demonstrate counter-terrorists’ resolve to allies and adversaries, inspiring the former to act against terrorist and signaling to the latter that terrorism carries painful consequences. Further, Pillar suggests, force has the potential to undermining terrorist’s capability to conduct attacks in the short or long term.\footnote{Pillar, 101-104.}

Despite noting the significant benefits often associated with military force in counterterrorism, Pillar does so with substantial reservations; he repeatedly cautions that resorting to force against terrorist groups is not to be undertaken lightly. In making this case, he suggests that one of the most significant potential dangers of using force used against terrorist groups is that even when it delivers most or all of the benefits that it ostensibly promises, there remains a significant possibility that it will provoke retaliation from the group against which it is employed. He further notes that a forceful response to terrorists’ retaliatory attacks are likely to make state governments, especially those of nations with a decisive military advantage over its adversaries, seem to be engaged in bullying and become vulnerable to accusations that they are only capable of expressing themselves through force.\footnote{Ibid, 105-106.}

Francisco finds that pre-existing, mobilized organizations are most likely to respond to military coercion with massive, swift, and expanding mobilization, using acts of repression as focal points. He posits that this backlash response is most likely to manifest when (1) the wider public is sufficiently aware of the repressive acts, (2) the dissident group remains under the same leadership or if leadership arises to replace those eliminated through repression, and (3) if the dissident group is able to develop and employ adaptive strategies that minimize the risk of further repression in the future. Under these conditions, according to Francisco, efforts to reduce dissident violence through repression can paradoxically generate the opposite result.\(^{11}\)

Since the turn of the century, discussions regarding military force in counterterrorism have broadened to include forms of warfare that were not as prevalent in the pre-9/11 era. One of the most significant changes in the debate has been the increasing focus on the legal and ethical implications of openly using precision targeting methods against leaders of rogue regimes and against terrorist groups and their leadership.\(^{12}\) Particularly since Israel and the United States began openly conducting targeted killings in 2000 and 2001, respectively, many of those debates have centered around how, whether and under what circumstances targeted killings are likely to change terrorist capabilities, motivation, and targeting preferences.

Several authors have discussed the effect that targeted killings are believed to have on terrorist and insurgent groups’ attack behavior. Though the literature on this subject approaches the topic from a variety of different angles, discussions can be broadly categorized into two schools of thought. The first suggests that targeted killings have significant potential to erode terrorist capability, deter terrorist attacks, or, in some cases, destroy terrorist groups altogether.

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11 Francisco, 2005
In this view, though targeted killings employed against terrorist groups can in some cases generate collateral damage and invite revenge attacks against non-combatants, they nonetheless reduce terrorist violence overall and, ultimately, save more lives than they endanger. The second school suggests that targeted killings conducted against terrorist groups increases non-combatant death and suffering and is therefore counterproductive. Scholars and practitioners of this school posit that repression either provokes backlash from the terrorist organization being squeezed, alienates civilian populations and facilitates terrorist recruitment, or both. Each of these two schools will be discussed in turn below.

One of targeted killings’ most commonly cited benefits is its ability to disrupt or destroy terrorist groups by eliminating leaders whose direction is essential for a group’s effective function. Several authors have discussed the direct effect that leadership decapitation can have on terrorist groups at considerable length, positing that killing terrorist leaders can cause groups to fall into disarray or, in some cases, collapse entirely. This outcome is by no means guaranteed, particularly for decentralized groups that can weather the effects of leadership decapitation more effectively. In highly centralized organizations where decision-making and authority is located near the top of the hierarchy, however, or when groups are headed by particularly skilled or charismatic leaders, targeted killings have the potential deal a terrorist organizations a decisive and sometimes fatal blow.

Though targeted killings are often discussed in the context of their use against terrorist leadership, it is important to note that considerable benefits are often said to be derived from applying them to other elements of the terrorist organizational structure. Several authors have noted that one of targeted killings greatest potential benefits is its ability to reduce a terrorist

group’s supply of key facilitators, those skilled individuals necessary for a terrorist group to conduct attacks effectively. Each of these authors suggest that acts of terrorism do not depend primarily on large numbers of foot-soldiers who carry out attacks, but on a relatively small number of specially skilled individuals – bomb-makers, fundraisers, document forgers and the like. These individuals allow terrorist groups to operate with the efficiency and clandestinely required to conduct effective attacks and avoid being discovered, captured, or killed. According to these authors, coercive force used against these key facilitators, who are often difficult to replace, can significantly reduce a terrorist group’s operational effectiveness.

Though targeted killing’s ultimate goal is to destroy a terrorist organization entirely, that is only one of the tactic’s many potential benefits. One of targeted killings’ greatest anticipated contributions is their ability to unbalance terrorist groups and diminish their attacks’ effectiveness not only through the application of force but through the persistent threat of its use. When under the threat of constant and uncertain death, terrorist leaders and facilitators’ attention is focused on self-preservation and survival rather than offensive operations; the more those individuals are focused on staying one step ahead of military pressure, the less focused they are on carrying out acts of violence. In this view, the very threat of coercion constricts terrorist leaders’ freedom of movement, forces them into hiding, and requires them to spend considerable resources on avoiding their own death.

The threat of coercive pressure may also have a deterrent effect. Reminding terrorists that they are on the losing end of an asymmetrical power balance that overwhelmingly favors the state. According to some of targeted killings’ proponents, threatening and using coercive

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
capabilities to constantly remind terrorist leaders and rank and file members of that fact can erode terrorists’ morale and elicit changes in both their motivation and behavior. Gal Luft, for example, suggests that killing terrorist leaders signals to others within the organization the dangers of taking on a leadership role. This makes individual terrorists less likely to aspire to leadership positions, lengthening the time that those positions remain vacant. Over time, according to Luft, killing off a group’s leadership can make it more difficult for that group to attract and retain qualified leadership candidates who, fearing sudden death, hesitate to step into eliminated leaders’ shoes. This can lead to organizational confusion that has a negative effect on the group’s ability to function effectively.

For its proponents, all of these factors add up to a compelling case suggesting that targeted killings can have a significant effect on terrorist motivation and their ability to effectively conduct attacks. They also acknowledge, however, that while disruption or outright destruction of a terrorist group may be the long-term result of a targeted killing campaign, retaliation is a very real possibility in the short-term. David, Byman, and Statman all of whose analyses focus on the positive effect that Israeli targeted killings have on diminishing Palestinian terrorism, each temper their assessments by noting that revenge attacks have in fact occurred in response to Israeli operations. They also acknowledge that those attacks have generated significant civilian casualties. These authors suggest, however, that despite these revenge attacks, Israel nonetheless reaps sufficient rewards, militarily and psychologically, to justify targeted killings’ continued use.

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18 Wilner, 314
21 Byman, 101-102; David, 118
Wilner comes to a similar conclusion. After examining the short-term tactical effect of coercive military pressure on terrorist leaders in Afghanistan, Wilner finds that violence actually increases following the death of an influential terrorist leader. He points out, however, that though targeted killings correlate with an increase in attacks, they also correlate with a decrease in those attacks’ professionalism. According to Wilner, attacks increase numerically following a targeted killing operation, but they are employed using cruder means and against softer and more easily accessible targets. Despite being associated with a general increase in violence, therefore, in Wilner’s view targeted killings have a clear negative effect on terrorist groups’ ability to effectively operate.22

There are many scholars and commentators, who, despite acknowledging that targeted killings can bring significant benefits to a counterterrorism campaign, argue that the costs of using this particular repression tools generally outweigh the benefits. Though drawbacks that these individuals associate with targeted killings are many and varied, two stand out as being particularly relevant to this discussion:

First, critics protest that despite ostensibly being designed to target only suspected terrorists, repressive measures often result in significant collateral damage, including civilian casualties and damage to civilian property or infrastructure. Killing terrorist leaders and operatives, in this view, can be both ethically questionable and strategically counterproductive: targeted killings can simultaneously increase human suffering and strengthen terrorists groups by radicalizing local communities and making the previously non-committed more likely to join the terrorists’ cause.

Second, some observers note that killing terrorist operatives can give those individuals martyr status, provoke moral outrage, and invite revenge attacks against non-combatants. Rather

22 Wilner, 319
than deterring individuals from engaging in violence, targeted killings can actually help to increase terrorists’ fervor and bloodlust as more individuals step forward to avenge their slain comrades’ deaths. In this sense, by prompting terrorist groups to retaliate for attacks against their leaders or members, targeted killings can fuel revenge cycles and ultimately generate more violence than they prevent.

Some commentators approach the consequences of targeting operations from an ethical and humanitarian standpoint. Stephen de Wijze examines targeted killings in the Israeli-Palestinian context. In his treatment of this subject, Wijze suggests that although targeted killings are often billed as morally justified means of protecting civilians from terrorist attacks, the fact that the tactic almost necessarily involves collateral damage inflicted against non-combatants suggests that states using this approach will inevitably emerge from such killings with “dirty hands.”

To illustrate his point, de Wijze uses the example of the operation that the Israeli Defence Forces conducted against Salah Shahada, a Hamas official, in 2002. In that operation, Israeli forces dropped a one-ton bomb on a house where Shahada was hiding, killing Shahada, his assistant and thirteen other Palestinians, many of who were minors. Though he suggests that targeted killings can be simultaneously justifiable and morally reprehensible, de Wijze notes that the Shehada cases underscores the fact that a resort to targeted killings can only represent, at best, a flawed and morally questionable policy choice.

Yael Stein, a human rights specialist whom discusses Israel’s use of targeted killings against suspected Palestinian terrorists, takes a similar stance. Stein states unequivocally that collateral damage generated incident to those operations render them unjustifiable from a humanitarian standpoint and ultimately immoral. In her estimation, the fact that approximately

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24 Ibid.
one third of the people killed in Israeli targeted killings have been innocent bystanders is sufficient to suggest that those killings were disproportionate, using more force than was required to achieve the desired goal.

Michael Gross, an ethicist who also focuses on Israel’s use of targeted killings in the West Bank and Gaza, takes these arguments a step further. Gross acknowledges that targeted killings can serve several important functions and are not counterproductive in all cases. In some cases he argues – when eliminating a particularly tyrannical ruler, decisively hastening the end of a large-scale conventional conflict, or preventing imminent terrorist attacks for example – targeted killings are justifiable or even necessary to prevent wider suffering. He also notes that in certain unique circumstances, such as in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, targeted killings conducted against high-ranking terrorist figures in support of broader security and stabilization operations can have a positive effect.25

Despite making these concessions, Gross makes clear that Israel’s targeted killing operations do not meet that standard. He concludes that the majority of Israel’s operations against suspected Palestinian terrorists do not pass ethical muster because they are ineffective at preventing terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. Though he takes a number of different factors into account to come to this conclusion, his argument rests in large part on the assertion that that Israeli targeted killings are ineffective because they spark retaliation and revenge cycles that ultimately result in the death of the very civilian non-combatants they are ostensibly designed to protect. Further, Gross suggests that many of Israel’s targeted killings are conducted not as a legitimate form of interdiction or as a means of destroying terrorist groups, but explicitly as a form of harassment or retribution. Those killings therefore cause destruction and non-

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combatant suffering both directly through collateral damage and indirectly by sparking revenge cycles, all without serving any legitimate purpose.  

Military Repression, Global-Local Insurgency, and Terrorist Targeting Practices

Some commentators have suggested that although the struggle against al Qaeda and its associated movements has often been billed as a counterterrorism effort, the conflicts in which the United States and its allies are engaged in fact have many characteristics of a protracted counterinsurgency campaign. To these authors, al Qaeda’s dual status as both a terrorist and an insurgent organization suggests that it has strengths, vulnerabilities, and strategic objectives that set it substantially apart from traditional terrorist groups. This in turn implies that when used against al Qaeda and its associated movements, many of the tools traditionally used against terrorist groups are unlikely to produce the reactions typically expected or work to the desired effect. The following section will further develop this line of reasoning.

Insurgency is traditionally defined as a conflict between a non-ruling group and ruling authorities in which the non-ruling group consciously uses political resources and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics. (O’Neill) As differentiated from other forms of warfare, one of insurgency’s defining characteristics is that it methodical and protracted struggle; unlike coup d’états and revolutions, insurgencies are conducted step-by-step over time. One of insurgency’s primary objectives is to undermine the ruling authority’s claim to legitimacy by showcasing its inability to maintain control of its territory or population. This objective is often pursued through recourse to guerilla

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26 Ibid, 360.
warfare in which groups of armed individuals attack enemy military forces, and attempt to exercise some form of control over a defined geographical area and its population.\(^{29}\) These efforts, designed to undermine the government’s authority and control, are commonly coupled with extensive propaganda and psychological efforts. These are meant to mobilize popular support for the insurgents’ struggle against established national government or foreign occupying forces.

Traditional terrorist groups, despite also using violence to achieve political aims, differ from insurgent organizations in a number of important respects. Traditional terrorist organizations are typically smaller than insurgent groups and often operate clandestinely. They do not generally function as armed units and typically actively avoid confrontations with government military forces. Given their small size and need to operate clandestinely out of reach of state security forces, terrorist groups generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory. These groups’ smaller size also usually prevents them from undertaking mass political mobilization efforts, which requires significant logistical effort and coordination on a large-scale.\(^{30}\)

It is important to note that despite there being considerable differences between insurgency and terrorism in their traditional forms, the line between these two forms of warfare – and the groups that employ them – is becoming increasingly blurred.\(^{31}\) This is primarily because although they are often employed as stand-alone means of advancing political objectives, terrorist and insurgent strategies are increasingly being used interchangeably or synergistically to exploit weaknesses and keep government adversaries off balance. Examples of this type of phenomenon abound; there are a number of groups that employ a variety of terrorist tactics – such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (Tamil Tigers) in Sri Lanka, Hizballah in Lebanon,

\(^{30}\) Ibid.
\(^{31}\) Ibid, 35-36
and Al Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahideen (al-Shabaab) in Somalia. Despite clearly qualifying as terrorist groups, these organizations, because of their size, tactics, and control over territory and populace, are commonly also described as guerilla insurgent movements. These groups have historically proven difficult to counter; strategic planners and state security forces often struggle to determine which tools to use to counter groups exhibiting both characteristics.32

Al Qaeda – and more recently its global affiliates -- have emerged as one of the most dangerous and effective examples of this phenomenon. Despite not being an insurgent organization in the traditional sense – they do not control or administer territory or, for the most part, attack conventional forces in formed military units – al Qaeda and its affiliates exhibit a number of characteristics that classify them as much more than a traditional terrorist organization.33 David Kilcullen notes that al Qaeda’s military strategy, which includes miring the United States in a number of protracted bleeding wars, has at least as much in common with classical insurgent strategies as with those of traditional terrorist groups. In Kilcullen’s view, tactics that al Qaeda uses to put its strategy in motion – provocation, intimidation, protraction, and exhaustion – clearly identify the group as an insurgent organization in every meaningful sense, albeit on a transnational scale.34 While large-scale, spectacular, traditionally “terrorist” attacks are always going to be one of its core objectives in its struggle against the United States, al Qaeda’s primary strategy involves triggering or co-opting local insurgencies, infusing them with globally-focused Islamist ideological focus, prompting the United States to intervene, and

33 Gompert, 3-4.
tying U.S. forces down in bloody insurgent conflicts. Kilcullen describes this process as being divided into four distinct stages, which are as follows:

(1) Infection: al Qaeda operatives establish a presence in a remote, ungoverned, or conflict-ridden part of an Islamic country and attempt to entrench itself in the local society.

(2) Contagion: al Qaeda spreads violence and Islamist ideology within the host country and to other countries in the region.

(3) Intervention: contagion prompts external forces take action against al Qaeda. This can include direct foreign intervention or action taken by local or regional entities.

(4) Rejection: al Qaeda enlists local actors to fight alongside its operatives against the foreign presence. This requires encouraging local actors to see the intervening authority as more foreign and threatening than al Qaeda.

The end result of this process is a full-blown “Global-Local” insurgency, in which Islamist motives and terrorist methods substantially, and in some cases irreversibly, alter local political agendas and infuse them with non-negotiable causes, such as religion. This makes them much more difficult to counter or quell.

Counterinsurgency theorists have noted that understanding al Qaeda’s strategy and tactics as being a mixture of insurgent and terrorist approaches is crucial to thwarting its objectives and countering the group globally. Viewing al Qaeda’s strategy as fundamentally that of a terrorist-insurgent group rather than that of a traditional terrorist group can help government planners understand al Qaeda’s strategic mindset and anticipate what type of action it might take in furtherance of its goals and objectives. Understanding that inciting and maintaining protracted

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid, 35-38.
37 Gompert, 27.
insurgencies is a critical component of al Qaeda’s strategy can also help government planners recognize that some of the tools at their disposal, despite being of potential use in traditional counterterrorism campaigns, might prove ineffective or counterproductive when attempting to counter global-local insurgences.  

The global-local insurgency model carries significant implications with respect to al Qaeda’s expected targeting practices, three of which stand out as being particularly important. First, it suggests that when faced with military pressure, al Qaeda and groups of a similar strategic outlook will increase its attacks to provoke a violent government response. One of the principal means by which insurgent groups in general and al Qaeda in particular attempt to generate popular support is by provoking arbitrary and violent and indiscriminate government response. When faced with pressure, especially pressure that generates non-combatant casualties upon which they can rhetorically capitalize, terrorists groups focus on provoking, catalyzing, and intensifying counterterrorism repression to further alienate the population from the existing governing authority and solidify popular support.

Second, the global-local insurgency model suggests that when conducting attacks, al Qaeda should make every effort to minimize or at least appear to be minimizing local civilian casualties. Though mass casualty attacks are a preferred tactic under some circumstances – when provoking inter-communal violence to crystallize ethnic identities for example -- attacks that generate significant indigenous civilian casualties are likely to work against al Qaeda’s strategic interests in a global-local insurgency scenario. In global-local insurgencies, al Qaeda requires that the local civilian population at least tacitly support its presence. The more it portrays itself as

38 Compert, 6.
39 O’Neill, 80
similar to the local population and a champion of its interests, the more successful it will be in achieving its objectives.\textsuperscript{41} This should predict, therefore, that one of al Qaeda’s main objectives when attempting to co-opt grievances and entrench itself locally would be to focus on keeping indigenous non-combatant casualties to a minimum, thereby avoiding alienating local populations to the greatest extent possible.

Third, though al Qaeda should attempt to design its attacks to minimize local non-combatant casualties it should increase attacks against the state. As an insurgency tactic, terrorism is most useful when used selectively against hated individuals and groups to increase popular support for insurgents.\textsuperscript{42} In this context, terrorism is used to demonstrate government weakness and manipulate pre-existing local resentment to cause the civilian population to identify with the insurgents.\textsuperscript{43} Targeting instruments of the state, particularly security services, are a means of obtaining both of these objectives and increasing in-group identity cohesion with the population on whose support insurgents rely.

\textsuperscript{41} Killcullen, 38
\textsuperscript{42} O’Neill, 79
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
Chapter III: Study Methodology

The viewpoints highlighted in the above discussion, led to the development of two hypotheses, which are as follows:

**H1: Military repression is associated with increased attacks against the pressuring agents’ non-combatant constituents.**

**H2: Military repression is associated with increased attacks against state security services.**

To test these hypotheses this study examines 14 attacks perpetrated by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) between January 2009 and December 17, 2009 (the period between AQAP’s founding and the first of six counterterrorist missile strikes executed against its operatives) and between December 18, 2009 and October 2010 (the period from the initiation of the counterterrorist targeting campaign to present) to determine whether military pressure was associated with a shift in AQAP’s attack targets.

**Definitions**

*Military Repression* is narrowly defined for the purpose of this study to include the initiation of targeted bombing and missile strike operations against AQAP on December 17, 2010.

*Pressuring agent* in this instance refers to the United States and Yemeni government.

There is little reliable evidence to determine the extent to which the United States is involved in each individual offensive operation that the Yemeni government has taken against AQAP since December 17, 2009. There is, however, ample, publicly available evidence to suggest that the United States has taken direct action against AQAP targets in Yemen and provided intelligence
and logistical support in multiple cases.\textsuperscript{44} Given that fact, \textit{pressuring agents} in the context of this study refers to both the United States and the Yemeni government.

\textit{Attacks} are defined as intentional acts of violence, with and without resulting damage or casualties, initiated by al Qaeda for which al Qaeda has claimed responsibility. This excludes al Qaeda counterattacks undertaken during government-initiated engagements and acts of violence that third parties attribute to al Qaeda without verification.

\textit{Non-combatants} are defined as civilians unaffiliated with government security services (police, military, and intelligence).

Data regarding U.S. and Yemeni military initiatives against AQAP were obtained from public media sources. Data regarding al Qaeda attacks and claims for responsibility between January 2009 and June 2010 were obtained from the National Counterterrorism Center’s World Incident Tracking System database. Given that that database did not have data on attacks conducted between July 2010 and October 2010, data for that period were obtained from the American Enterprise Institute’s AQAP and Suspected AQAP Attacks in Yemen Tracker, which monitors activity by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This website draws information from public media sources.

\textbf{Caveats}

There are some drawbacks to selecting AQAP as a case study for this analysis. First, despite its members and leaders having maintained a presence in Yemen for quite some time, AQAP in its current form has only been active since early 2009. Additionally, government crackdowns in the form of bombings and missile strikes against AQAP did not begin in earnest

\textsuperscript{44} Raghavan, Sudarsan and Michael D. Shear, “U.S.-aided attack in Yemen thought to have killed Aulaqi, 2 al Qaeda leaders,” \textit{Washington Post}, December 25, 2009; Jamjoom, Mohanned, “Yemen: U.S. has carried out airstrikes in Yemen,” CNN, September 30, 2010.
until late 2009. This limits the amount of data on both AQAP attacks and government coercion efforts, factors that limit the analysis’ explanatory power.

There also some limitations to the sources from which the data for this study was drawn. Given that many of the military and intelligence operations conducted against al Qaeda are conducted covertly, some important information, including information regarding which and how many al Qaeda operatives are being targeted, when, and by whom, is necessarily limited. As the authors of the American Enterprise Institute’s AQAP tracker note\footnote{Curran, Cody, James Gallagher, Patrick Knapp, “AQAQ and Suspected AQAP Attacks in Yemen Tracker 2010,” American Enterprise Institute, November 15, 2010.}, much publicly available data on casualties of both terrorist attacks and military action in Yemen is also of limited verifiability and quality; in some cases it is based on government reports that may be biased toward inflating government capabilities or al Qaeda excesses. Keeping that consideration in mind, the study focused on measuring the most relatively objective variable available – the intended target of al Qaeda attacks and the number and timing of military operations rather than specific casualty numbers – to minimize the effect of those deficiencies.

One final consideration is that this study was conducted in recognition of the fact that a variety of factors, not solely military pressure, can potentially influence terrorist decision-making. In light of that fact, the study is limited to identifying apparent correlations; it does not attempt to establish a causal relationship between military repression and changes in attack targets.
Chapter IV: Military Force against AQAP

Background

AQAP was formed in January 2009, the product of a merger between two different al Qaeda affiliates that had previously operated autonomously in Yemen in Saudi Arabia, respectively. Since the merger, AQAP has quickly gained international attention through a series of high-profile attacks in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and abroad, including well-publicized attack attempts against the United States.\(^{46}\) The United States Government, which designated the group a foreign terrorist organization in January 2010, has publicly declared that it believes AQAP to be the greatest terrorist threat to the United States and the world community.\(^{47}\)

Though it is gained worldwide attention and celebrity only relatively recently as a central battleground in the struggle against al Qaeda, it is important to note that Yemen has always featured prominently in al Qaeda’s history and strategic outlook. Al Qaeda has always held Yemen, the bin Laden family’s ancestral homeland, to be an area of great symbolic and strategic significance.\(^{48}\) Osama bin Laden, who married a Yemeni woman shortly before the September 11\(^{th}\), has always had a personally affinity for Yemen, which he considers to be a bastion of ideological religious purity, “one of the best Arab and Muslim countries in terms of its adherence to tradition and the faith,” and a place where one can, “breath clean air unblemished by humiliation.”\(^{49}\) More than just a place of symbolic and spiritual significance, however, Yemen has also always represented an area on which al Qaeda has felt it could rely as a source of manpower, and strategic depth. Bin Laden has repeatedly noted that Yemen, from whence the

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
Prophet Mohammed believed would come “12,000 fighters who would support God and His Prophet” and be among the best of his men, would figure prominently in al Qaeda’s strategic planning in a number of important respects.\footnote{Ibid, 85-86.}

History has largely borne out bin Laden’s prediction. Since its founding, al Qaeda has always had significant numbers of Yemenis within its ranks. Several individuals in bin Laden’s inner circle have been Yemenis that fought alongside him against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Bin Laden maintained close ties to Yemen after the Soviet withdrawal, sending weapons, funds, and seasoned fighters to the country to help insurgent groups fight against the communist regime ruling Yemen’s south.\footnote{Scheuer, 122.} After the defeat of the communist regime and the reunification of the country in 1990, Yemen continued to be a significant focal point for al Qaeda activity in the Middle East. Al Qaeda’s first anti-U.S. attack, which was conducted against U.S. troops headed to Somalia, was conducted in Aden, Yemen in December 1992.\footnote{Ibid, 146.} In 2000, Yemeni al Qaeda cells executed bombing attack against the USS The Sullivan’s, which ended unsuccessfully. The group made successful attempt against the U.S. Navy destroyer USS Cole nine months later, killing 17 American sailors and injuring 39 more. This attack, in which a small, explosives-laden boat raft rammed into the destroyer’s side, placed al Qaeda in Yemen in the international spotlight, demonstrating the group’s capability and operational reach.

Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, the Yemeni government, wary of being viewed as a passive terrorism supporter, stepped up its counterterrorism efforts against al Qaeda cells operating in Yemen. Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Sale significantly increased cooperation with U.S. authorities in an effort to bring pressure on the group’s senior leadership and collapse
the organization from above. Those efforts culminated in a Yemeni-assisted U.S. missile strike that killed the group’s leader, Abu Ali al-Horthy, and five other operatives in November 2002.\textsuperscript{53} Yemeni authorities arrested al-Horthy’s replacement one year later. These setbacks effectively dismantled the group, leading to a dramatic reduction in attacks between 2003 and 2005.

In February 2006 23 suspected al Qaeda members escaped from a prison facility in Sana, the Yemeni capital. Among the escapees were Jamal al-Bandai, the alleged mastermind of the USS \textit{Cole} bombing, Nasser al-Wahayshi, AQAP’s current leader, and Qasim al-Raymi, who currently serves as al-Wahayshi’s deputy. Al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi formed AQY shortly after the prison break.

AQY executed several attacks between 2006 and 2008, predominately targeting tourists, domestically and foreign-owned energy infrastructure, and military facilities. In September 2008, AQY operatives attacked the U.S. embassy in Sanaa using bombs and rocket-propelled grenades. Following the 2008 embassy attack, U.S. authorities began to examine developments in Yemen more closely, increasingly viewing the growing al Qaeda presence there as a threat to U.S. strategic interests in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

After the January 2009 merger between al Qaeda’s Saudi and Yemeni affiliates, the newly formed AQAP executed a several attacks in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In part as a result of this increasing activity, the United States increased its pressure on the Saleh government to crack down on Yemeni al Qaeda cells. The Yemeni government initially responded by arresting a number of AQAP operatives in August 2009, but later turned its attention toward suppressing a Shia Houthi insurgency in the north and the secessionist movement in the south that had been consuming much of the state’s resources since 2004.\textsuperscript{54}


Joint-Yemeni-U.S. pressure on al Qaeda resumed dramatically beginning on December 17, 2009, when the United States launched cruise missile strikes against suspected al Qaeda training camps north of Sanaa. These strikes, executed in conjunction with Yemeni Special Forces raids, killed an estimated total of up to 34 suspected al Qaeda operatives.\(^{55}\) In the months following that initial strike, the Yemeni government increased pressure further, conducting a number of raids against suspected hideouts and executing five additional airstrikes between December 2009 and October 2010.

**Hypotheses in the Yemen Context**

**H1: Military repression is associated with increased attacks against the pressuring agents’ non-combatant constituents.**

The Yemeni government, in conjunction with the United States, dramatically increased military pressure on al Qaeda figures between December 2009 and October 2010. This pressure included six strikes against al Qaeda positions in southern and eastern Yemen that killed as many as 100 AQAP operatives, including several local commanders.\(^{56}\) The counterterrorism literature on retaliation in response to military force and targeted killing operations suggests that in response to military attacks against its operatives, AQAP should respond by attacking non-combatants. In the Yemen context, this translates to increased attacks against Yemeni and American civilians.


\(^{56}\) See Appendix B
**H2: Military repression is associated with increased attacks against state security services.**

Several commentators have noted that AQAP’s senior leadership recognizes that in order to maintain a significant operational presence in Yemen’s remote areas and protect the group against government counterterrorism offensives, it requires a degree of support—at the very least passive support—from Yemen’s civilian population. This recognition has led AQAP to engage in efforts to develop connections to Yemen’s tribal population, especially tribes located in Yemen’s eastern Marib region. It has done this by presenting itself as a champion of local causes and as sympathetic to local, particularly tribal, interests.\(^{57}\) AQAP has also gone to great lengths to portray the Yemeni government and the United States as deliberately trying to destroy the tribal system and restrict the tribes’ autonomy in an effort to exploit traditional tribal animosity toward central government authority and outside interference.\(^{58}\)

The global-local insurgency model predicts that under pressure AQAP should try to strengthen ties with Yemen’s civilian population by minimizing attacks on Yemeni non-combatants and focusing on creating in-group identity. In this view, attacks should reflect an effort to demonstrate or solidify al Qaeda’s connection to and identification with the Yemeni tribes, using attacks to create unity against a common hated enemy and to provoke excessive force that alienates civilians from the government. In the Yemen context, this suggests that al Qaeda should respond to military pressure by attacking Yemeni security services.


\(^{58}\) Charles Levinson and Margaret Coker, “Al Qaeda’s Deep Tribal Ties Make Yemen a Terror Haven,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 22, 2010;
AQAP Attack Data

Before Military Repression (4 attacks)

Between January 26, 2009 (the date of AQAP’s formation) and December 17, 2010 (the date of the first missile strike against al Qaeda operatives) there were four attacks for which AQAP claimed responsibility. Of those attacks, none were directed at Yemeni or U.S. non-combatants, one was directed against Yemeni security services, and three were directed against foreign non-combatant targets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident Date</th>
<th>Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 15, 2009</td>
<td>South Korean Tourists in Hadramout Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 18, 2009</td>
<td>South Korean Diplomats in Sanaa Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 7, 2009</td>
<td>Saudi Deputy Interior Minister in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 3, 2009</td>
<td>Yemeni Police Vehicle in Hadramout Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After Military Repression (8 attacks)

Between December 18, 2009 and October 31, 2010 AQAP conducted eight attacks for which it claimed responsibility. Of those attacks, none were directed against Yemeni non-combatants, seven were directed against Yemeni security services, and three were directed against foreign targets.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident Date</th>
<th>Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 25, 2010</td>
<td>American Civilian Airliner, Detroit, Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 26, 2010</td>
<td>British Diplomatic Convoy in Sanaa Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 19, 2010</td>
<td>Yemeni Intel. Service Building Adan Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 14, 2010</td>
<td>Intelligence and Police HQs, Abyan Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 22, 2010</td>
<td>Yemeni Military Vehicle, Shabwah Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 25, 2010</td>
<td>Yemeni Army Patrol, Shabwah Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 27, 2010</td>
<td>Security Personnel Bus, Sanaa Province, Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 29, 2010</td>
<td>U.S. Civilian Cargo Planes, Dubai, UAE and London, UK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Graph showing targets and represion before and after](image-url)
Chapter V: Analysis and Policy Recommendations

The study’s findings suggest that initiation of military repression is associated with a shift in Islamist-Insurgent groups’ targeting preferences. Specifically, the findings strongly support the second hypothesis (H2), suggesting that military repression is associated with an increase in attacks against government security services. Findings also weakly support (H1), suggesting that increase in military repression is associated with increased attacks on the pressuring agent’s non-combatant constituency. The study’s findings also show that attacks against foreign targets (not of the pressuring agent’s constituency) decreased after the application of military pressure.

This implies that assertions that al Qaeda’s affiliates have strategic preferences similar to those of traditional insurgent groups may in fact be founded. When pressured militarily, AQAP increased its attacks against agents of the Yemeni government, an entity that it has repeatedly attempted to portray as actively victimizing Yemen’s civilian population. It did not, however, conduct attacks against Yemeni civilians on whose support its strategic objectives rely. As importantly, AQAP increased attacks directed against the United States, further suggesting that, when faced with significant military pressure calling strength and capability into question, terrorist-insurgent groups focus on demonstrating the pressuring agents’ impotence (inability to protect themselves), provoking overreaction from domestic ruling authority and intervention from foreign forces, and solidifying in-group identify by attacking targets whom local civilians already resent (i.e. government security services and intervening foreign powers).

This has potentially significant implications for policy. First, the fact that AQAP increased attacks against both the Yemeni government and the United States following the application of military pressure suggests that fears that terroist-insurgent groups will react to force applied by the U.S. and its local allies by increasing violence are not entirely unfounded.
Moreover, the level of discrimination displayed in those attacks, that is, their focus on targets that would avoid alienating the local civilian population, suggests that al Qaeda and its affiliates may have internalized the lessons learned by other groups regarding the importance of maintaining local support, even under significant pressure. This suggests that inducing local communities to isolate and “reject” al Qaeda elements in a manner similar to Sunni communities’ rejection of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2007 and 2008 could be a more difficult undertaking than in the past.

As previously noted, the literature suggests that targeting terrorist groups’ leadership and reducing its supply of key facilitators is a useful means by which to degrade those groups’ operational capability. It also acknowledges, however, that because decentralized terrorist-insurgent organizations such as al Qaeda, are less susceptible to leadership decapitation efforts and can replace members relatively easily this sort of force application is at best a short term disruption strategy. Whether bombing and missile strikes have undermined AQAP’s operational capability is outside the scope of this analysis. This study’s findings, however, by lending weight to counterinsurgency theorists’ global-local analysis model, suggests that applying force against terrorist-insurgent groups like AQAP might ultimately work to those groups’ strategic advantage by helping them clarify to their local target audiences that intervening forces, not al Qaeda, is the aggressor. Understanding that fact should help policymakers see the importance of crafting strategies that undermine al Qaeda’s links to the population whose support it needs rather than relying exclusively on coercive tools that may ultimately strengthen them.
Appendix A: AQAP Attacks

March 15, 2009 – Attack on South Korean Tourists in Hadramout

On March 15, 2009, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive vest in Shibam Yemen. The attack killed four South Korean tourists and their two tour guides, both of who were Yemenis. Five civilians were wounded. Three of the wounded civilians were South Korean, the other two were Yemeni.

AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it was in retaliation for the killing of AQY members Hamza al-Kuwaiti and Abdullah Ba-Tais in a police raid the previous August. The statement also said that the attack was carried out in response for South Korea’s role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

March 18, 2009 – Attack on South Korean Diplomats in Sanaa (No casualties)

On March 18, 2009 a suicide bomber attacked a convoy of South Korean diplomats traveling to Sanaa airport using an improvised explosive device. One of the vehicles in the convoy was damaged but there were no injuries or fatalities.

August 27, 2009 – Attack on Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef

On August 27, 2009, a suicide bomber detonated an IED targeting Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayef near his office in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Nayef was slightly wounded during the attack. AQAP claimed responsibility for the operation, identifying the suicide bomber as Abdullah Hassan Taleh Asiri.

November 3, 2009 – Attack on Police Vehicles in Hadramout

On November 3, 2009, armed gunmen opened fire on two police cars in Asfay al Ayn, a town in Hadramout Province, Yemen. Seven police officers were killed. AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack.

December 25, 2009 – Attempted attack on U.S. airliner over Detroit, Michigan

On December 25, 2009 an individual attempted to detonate a suicide bomb onboard a civilian airliner above Detroit, Michigan. The improvised explosive device used in the attempted attack malfunctioned and did detonate. One civilian was wounded attempting to physically subdue the bomber. AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack.

April 26, 2010 - Attack on British Diplomatic Convoy in Sanaa, Sanaa Province, Yemen

On April 26, 2010 a suicide bomber detonated an explosive vest near a UK diplomatic convoy in the Yemeni capital Sanaa. Three nearby civilians were wounded and a Yemeni police car was damaged. AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack.
June 19, 2010 – Attack on Yemeni Intelligence Service Building, Adan, Adan Province, Yemen

On June 19, 2010, in Adan, 'Adan, Yemen, four assailants fired small arms and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) at a building of the Yemeni intelligence service.

July 14, 2010 – Attack against intelligence and police headquarters in Zinjbar, Abyan Province, Yemen

Twenty al Qaeda gunmen executed a coordinated attack on the intelligence and police headquarters in the town of Zinjibar in Abyan governorate, initiating clashes that left at least three people dead. The attack involved multiple vehicles, motorcycles, and a sniper, according to reports. Seven suspects were arrested in the incident, which follows a similar attack in June against the security headquarters in Aden. AQAP released a statement saying that two battalions from the Brigade of the Martyr Commander Jamil al ‘Anbari conducted the attack in revenge for ‘Anbari’s death.

July 22, 2010 – Attack on Yemeni Soldiers’ Patrol Vehicle in Ataq, Shabwah Province, Yemen

Five Yemeni soldiers were killed and a sixth injured in an al Qaeda attack on their patrol vehicle in the city of Ataq in Shabwah governorate. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack in an August 7 announcement on Islamist websites.

July 25, 2010 – Ambush on Yemeni Army Patrol in Shabwah Governate

Al Qaeda militants ambushed a Yemeni army patrol, killing six soldiers in Shabwah governorate. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility on August 7 on Islamist websites. It acknowledged that two of its own militants had died in the attack, but promised to continue attacks against the government of the “tyrant,” President Ali Abdullah Saleh. "Until they repent, Ali Abdullah Saleh, his government and his soldiers are a legitimate target for us. We also consider all those who support (Saleh) and the crusader campaign against the Muslim nation a legitimate target,” the message said.

August 27, 2010 – Attack on Army Post outside of Zinjibar, Abyan Province, Yemen

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claimed credit for an attack on a Yemeni checkpoint outside of Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan governorate. Militants targeted the army post at sunset and attacked with rocket-propelled grenades. Eleven soldiers and a civilian were killed.

September 27, 2010 – Attack on Bus Carrying Security Personnel, Sanaa, Sanaa Province, Yemen

Two al Qaeda militants attacked a bus carrying security personnel in Shamlan district in Sana’a on Saturday, injuring 10 people and killing one. The incident occurred after the Sana’a chief of police received a tip on Friday that al Qaeda was plotting an attack on security bases in the capital.
AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack late last month on a political security bus in Sana’a that killed 14 senior officers from the counterterrorism unit and injured others. The officers were targeted after completing a training intelligence course taught by U.S. trainers.

October 29, 2010 – IED Attack against Cargo Planes in Dubai in London en Route to Chicago, Illinois

Two powerful bombs hidden in packages were discovered aboard cargo planes in Dubai and London after a tip from Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef set off an investigation. The packages were shipped from Yemen and were addressed to synagogues in Chicago.
Appendix B: Bombing and Missile Strikes Against AQAP

December 17, 2009

Yemen claimed that 30 al Qaeda militants are killed and 17 arrested in air raids and security sweeps in Abyan and Arhab districts northeast of Sanaa. The December 17 strike targeted what was thought to be a training camp run by AQAP in the town of Ma’jalah in the province Abyan. A separate strike also took place the same day in the province of Sanaa.

Independent reports indicated that between 60 and 90 civilians, mostly nomads living in a tent city, were killed. Amnesty International claims, based on a Yemeni government investigation, that 14 al Qaeda fighters, along with 41 civilians, including 14 women and 21 children, were killed in the Abyan attack.

According to photographic evidence produced by Amnesty International, the December 17 airstrike is linked to the U.S. The photos show part of a broken up, U.S.-made, BGM-109D Tomahawk cruise missile and an unexploded BLU 97 cluster bomblet, munitions used in the warhead of the Tomahawk.

December 24, 2009

Yemeni forces backed by U.S. intelligence struck a series of suspected al Qaeda hideouts, including a meeting of senior leaders, killing at least 30 militants the government said. An unnamed official told reporters that the strike took place as dozens of militants gathered in Shabwa province, east of the capital, Sanaa.

January 15, 2010

Six al Qaeda militants were killed in an air strike in northern Yemen. “Two cars carrying eight dangerous al Qaeda members were hit in an area between Saada and al Jouf,” a Yemeni security official told Reuters.

Yemeni government erroneously claimed it killed Qasim al Raymi, the military commander of AQAP. Yemeni government said that its air force struck two cars carrying Raymi and other senior AQ members in the al Ajasher region, a mountainous area between Saada and Jawf.

January 20, 2010

On January 20, 2010, Yemeni warplanes struck the house of Ayed al-Shabwani, a local al Qaeda chief in Maarib province east of Sanaa.
March 14, 2010

On March 14, 2010, the Yemeni military carried out a series of air raids against suspected al Qaeda operatives in southern Abyan Province. This was part of a multi-day airstrike campaign that, according to government officials, resulted in the death of Jamil Nasser Abdulla al-Ambari, believed to be al Qaeda’s leader in southern Abyan. An initial report from security officials suggested that the death toll from the strike could be as high as nine people.

May 25, 2010

The deputy governor of Marib province, five of his bodyguards, and two AQAP operatives, including a local leader, were killed in an airstrike. Jaber al-Shabwani, the deputy governor of Maarib, was killed with a number of his relatives and travel companions in an air strike targeting the Wadi Obeida area, where al Qaeda elements are present,” the provincial official said.

October 17, 2010

Yemeni aircraft have bombed suspected al Qaeda positions in southern Yemen, a day after fighters ambushed a military convoy killing four soldiers. The three suspected members of al Qaeda’s regional wing were reported killed in the assault on Sunday in Abyan province.
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