THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION
AS A COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY AGAINST ISLAMIST TERRORIST GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis evaluates the effectiveness of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy against Islamist terrorist groups by evaluating attack data and other historical and contextual factors in three case studies: al-Qaeda in Iraq, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria. My main finding is that leadership decapitation is not correlated with the reduction of terrorist activities by these groups. Theories on leadership decapitation did not predict the increase or decrease in a group’s attack capabilities in any consistent or reliable manner. In all of these cases, experts heavily attributed the changes in a group’s operational capability to factors other than leadership decapitation. The key lesson policy-makers and military planners can draw from this study is that the experiences and outcomes of leadership decapitation against one terrorist group should in no way be directly applied to or expected in another.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy against Islamist terrorist groups. “Effectiveness” means the degradation of a group’s capability to a point where it is weakened enough that it no longer poses a major threat; however, effective decapitation does not necessarily mean that the targeted group has unquestionably met its demise.

The paper will approach the question of whether leadership decapitation is effective in counterterrorism by evaluating attack data in three case studies of Islamist terrorist groups that have experienced this counterterrorism measure: al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). The cases are limited to Islamist groups because current US military engagements in the Middle East and South Asia make this particular type of terrorist organization the most policy-relevant. All three were also chosen because they are non-transnational. It would be much more difficult to measure the effects of a counterterrorism strategy on a group whose members and activity are dispersed regionally or globally.

America’s current “war against al-Qaeda” employs leadership decapitation as a major element of its counterterrorism strategy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and (covertly) in Pakistan. The United States began exercising leadership decapitation against al-Qaeda and its affiliates post-9/11 without a real understanding of the effectiveness of the strategy. A review of literature on the topic suggests that an in-depth understanding of the strategy did not exist at the time government and military leaders were planning counterterrorism strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan because comprehensive studies
measuring its effectiveness in counterterrorism did not exist in open sources. Even now, it is difficult to find much written on the subject.

The research for this paper relies largely on secondary sources. Academic journal articles, congressional reports, newspaper articles, books written on related subjects, think tank studies, recent Ph.D. dissertations, and Master’s theses by military professionals form the basis of this study. This paper also references some primary sources, including official government publications, national counterterrorism strategy reports, and Presidential statements. The analysis in the three chosen case studies relies heavily on attack data from the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database and the National Counterterrorism Center’s Worldwide Incident Tracking System. However, the case studies will still reference secondary sources to provide context to the findings.

The idea is that this paper will determine to what extent current theories and understandings of leadership decapitation are applicable to Islamist terrorist groups. At the very least, it will be able to shed more light on the level of expectation we should have for this strategy against similar groups. Having an informed understanding of the limits of leadership decapitation will help policy-makers and military planners make wiser cost-benefit calculations when formulating future counterterrorism policies.

This paper will begin with a section defining several key terms: terrorism, leadership decapitation, targeted killing, and capture. This will be followed by a review of available literature on the effectiveness of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy, its related topics, and an evaluation of the existing theories on the strategy’s effectiveness against terrorist groups. Case studies of the aforementioned three terrorist groups (AQI, TTP, and GIA) will follow, including an assessment of the
extent to which theories on the effectiveness leadership decapitation do or do not explain the effects of leadership removal on these groups. Fourth, the paper will briefly discuss important normative and legal considerations with regards to leadership decapitation. Fifth, the paper will describe the history of the United States’ use of the strategy in counterterrorism in order to illuminate some of the major assumptions and expectations of this strategy in the current war against al-Qaeda. This paper will conclude with a discussion of the lessons the United States should draw from the available literature on leadership decapitation and the three case studies, and provide suggestions for how these lessons should be incorporated into current counterterrorism strategies.
Leadership decapitation is the functional removal of an enemy group’s top leadership as a warfare strategy. Leadership decapitation can be accomplished by two means: targeted killing or capture. Targeted killing is the government-sanctioned direct targeting of a person with lethal force intended to cause death. Capture is the detainment or arrest of a targeted person. The definition of terrorism used in this paper is, “the premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”

The main purpose of leadership targeting is to degrade an enemy’s capability to wage war or mount terrorist operations. The strategy is implemented with the expectation that 1) the killing or disabling enemy leaders will diminish the quality of an enemy’s command and control by conferring command on less competent personnel, and 2) the attacks will force enemy leaders to disperse to alternative command sites, slowing down and undermining their communications and operations. The desired effects of leadership decapitation are the curtailment of hostilities and other changes in an enemy’s policy and behavior. Stephen Hosmer points out that leadership attacks have deterrent and coercive value because they threaten what enemy leaders usually value most: personal power and safety.

At the most basic level, the strategy of targeting enemy leaders is based on leadership and social network theories. Jenna Jordan, a current Ph.D. student at the

3 Ibid., 4.
4 Ibid., xi.
5 Ibid., xi.
University of Chicago, explains that these two theoretical perspectives have been used to bolster claims regarding the effectiveness of decapitation. Within the realm of leadership theories, the concept of charisma in particular has been pivotal in the development of, and optimism toward, leadership decapitation as a dominant US counterterrorism strategy. The theory explains that charismatic leaders provide the basis for a group’s strength and cohesion and are essential to the operational success of an organization. Those who are in favor of leadership decapitation argue that terrorist groups rely heavily on the abilities and charisma of their top leaders, and that when these leaders are removed, the organizations lose their focus and become prone to infighting and eventual collapse.

More recently, the social network theory has become the leading method in understanding the vulnerability of terrorist organizations. This theory is based on the belief that social ties between actors are the primary means by which one can understand the functioning of an organization. The emphasis on organizational dynamics allows the theory to predict greater variability in the success of decapitation. For instance, if organizations have networks that are susceptible to the removal of central actors, then leadership decapitation should be effective. Thus, hierarchical organizations are

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
considered more susceptible to leadership targeting than groups with flatter and or
decentralized organizational structures.\textsuperscript{14}

Indeed, the United States uses this theory to justify its use of targeted killing. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wrote that key leaders were one of terrorist groups’ centers of gravity.\textsuperscript{15} The 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism explains that “terrorist leadership provides the overall direction and strategy that links all these factors and thereby breathes life into a terror campaign” and “the loss of leadership can cause many organizations to collapse.”\textsuperscript{16} The 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism lists leadership targeting as one of the United State’s priorities of action and similar to the 2003 version, explains that leaders “offer the necessary direction, discipline, and motivation for accomplishing a given goal or task… The loss of a leader can degrade a group’s cohesiveness and in some cases may trigger its collapse.”\textsuperscript{17}

The most basic concept relating to leadership decapitation is assassination, which is the deliberate, extralegal killing of a public figure for political purposes.\textsuperscript{18} The term is used mostly to describe such actions during peacetime and is thus considered unlawful under international statute.\textsuperscript{19} Two studies regarding the effectiveness of assassination

\textsuperscript{14} Jordan 2008, 12.
\textsuperscript{17} “National Strategy for Combating Terrorism,” White House, Sep 2006, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{19} The requirement to differentiate between assassination in times of peace, which is unlawful, and the targeting of individuals in times of conflict, which is lawful, led to the use of the phrase \textit{targeted killing} to refer to the lawful targeting of individuals. Source: Glenn Johnson, “Mortus Discriminatus: Procedures in
both concluded that it is generally an unreliable and ineffective tool for creating the desired political change of enemy governments or groups. Murray Clark Havens, Carl Leiden, and Karl M. Schmitt evaluated the efficacy of assassination as a political tool by conducting ten case studies. They found that the impact of assassination on the political system tended to be low.\(^{20}\) In most cases, success from the point of view of the assassin was incomplete with either no change taking place at all or changes which were incongruent with those desired by the killer.\(^{21}\) Stephen Hosmer conducted a historical analysis of the effects of political assassinations in both peacetime and war. Similar to the Havens study, Hosmer found that the killing of an enemy’s leader rarely produced the changes in government policy and practice anticipated by the assassin.\(^{22}\)

When assassination becomes a strategy in wartime, it is referred to as leadership targeting. Like the literature on assassination, studies on leadership targeting generally conclude that the strategy is not an effective tool for eliminating one’s enemy. Robert Pape explains that beginning in the early 1990s, advocates of air power precision argued wars could be won from above by attacking enemy leaders, their communication systems, and infrastructure.\(^{23}\) He argues, however, that leadership targeting is not likely to produce coercive leverage for three reasons.\(^{24}\) First, it is very difficult to find individuals and kill them due to the security measures they take. Second, the death of a leader in war commonly brings about less change in policies than expected. And third, succession in most states is highly unpredictable in wartime, and even more so in closed

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 149.
\(^{22}\) Hosmer 2001, 19.
societies. Pape looked at six instances of the use of leadership decapitation by the United States from the early 1980s to 2003 and found that in each case, the strategy was ineffective or backfired.\textsuperscript{25} He observes that in Iraq in 1991, Bosnia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, and Afghanistan in 2001, the successful strategy was not missile strikes against the enemy leadership, but the combination of air power and ground forces.\textsuperscript{26}

Audrey Kurth Cronin argues that killing enemy leaders who enjoy widespread popular support has either had no measureable effect or has been counterproductive to the decapitator’s goals.\textsuperscript{27} She provides a more nuanced answer than the previous authors by explaining that the long-term effects of leadership decapitation are inconsistent. Cronin finds that the immediate effects of removing a leader vary depending on the structure of the organization, the degree to which it fosters a cult of personality, the availability of a viable successor, the nature of its ideology, the political context, and whether the leader was killed or imprisoned.\textsuperscript{28} She also argues that the reaction of terrorism’s multiple audiences is crucial because the effect of a leader’s removal on potential supporters of both the terrorist campaign and the counterterrorist is a greater determinant of whether leadership targeting will succeed (versus the type of action a state uses against the enemy or its operational effectiveness).\textsuperscript{29}

Lisa Langdon, Alexander Sarapu, and Matthew Wells analyzed the effect of leadership decapitation (both capturing and killing leaders) on social, political, and religious movements by conducting 35 case studies drawing from more than forty countries. They noted they were limited in their ability to generalize their findings

\textsuperscript{25}Pape, 2003.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{29}Ibid., 8.
because it was not a large $n$ study. Their analysis suggested that about half of the movements continued with “business as usual” after a crisis in leadership, but that groups seemed much more likely to disband or become less radical after the assassination of a leader.\textsuperscript{30} Their findings also suggested that religious beliefs may be among the strongest sources of cohesive attachment for a group because religious claims tend to persist in the face of obstacles that may stymie other ideologically-based, but non-religious movements.\textsuperscript{31}

The effectiveness of leadership decapitation against terrorist groups is a very new topic in academia. Academics are generally pessimistic about the prospects of leadership decapitation in counterterrorism. Daniel Byman, perhaps one of the most frequently cited experts, believes that targeting terrorist leaders is “difficult, is often ineffective, and can easily backfire” and that it less effective against decentralized groups.\textsuperscript{32} However, he explains that it can serve as a short-term expedient that reduces (but does not eliminate) terrorist threats.\textsuperscript{33} Byman states that when terrorist leaders are arrested or killed, their organizations are disrupted because the number of skilled terrorists is limited.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, leadership decapitation degrades an organization’s expertise. However, for leadership targeting to achieve an effect on a terrorist group requires a rapid pace of attacks in order

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{33} Byman 2009.
\textsuperscript{34} Byman 2006, 104.
to force surviving terrorists to spend an increasing amount of time protecting themselves and less time planning and carrying out attacks.  

Audrey Cronin expanded on her terrorism studies by looking specifically at the question of the effectiveness of leadership decapitation against terrorist organizations. Similar to the findings in her study of leadership decapitation writ large, she finds that the strategy’s effects against terrorist groups have varied, especially according to whether a group was hierarchically organized and oriented towards a charismatic leader.  

Cronin argues that it is not common that a terrorist group ends following the removal of a leader. She continues that more often, it is the weaknesses or tactical errors of a terrorist group itself that a state then highlights or exploits that drives a wedge between the group and its support base and eventually leads to the group’ demise.  

Jenna Jordan writes that “despite variability in the success of decapitation, optimism toward decapitation continues to dominate current counterterrorism policies.” This point is reflected well in recent literature on the topic written by military professionals. While leadership decapitation is not the most popular topic in political science circles, it is much more popular among military professionals. Peter Cullen, in his paper “The Role of Targeted Killing in the Campaign Against Terror,” discusses the legality, morality, and potential efficacy of a US policy of targeted killing in counterterrorism.  

35 Ibid.  
37 Ibid., 27.  
the policy of targeted killing remains an effective tactic in the campaign against terror." Unfortunately, there was no discussion of how he arrived at the conclusion that targeted killing is effective. He does list the pros and cons of the strategy, but he does not explain why the pros outweigh the cons. William Miles, in “Decapitation: A Case for a Better Guillotine,” argues that despite the potential legitimacy and moral costs of leadership decapitation, the advantages of the strategy are so great that it must be available to US military planners. However, he does not elaborate on why he believes the advantages outweigh the costs. In “A Time to Kill: When is Leadership Targeting an Effective Counterterrorism Strategy?” Randy Schliep argues that the key to an effective decapitation strategy is to interdict the leader before he or she is able to socialize and institutionalize his inspiration within the organization. Besides referring to leadership and social network theory, Schliep, like the previous authors, provides no empirical evidence to support his findings. Aside from these papers, the rest of the military writings on the subject are geared toward operational planners. An example of these works include the monograph “Decapitation Operations: Criteria for Targeting Enemy Leadership,” and “Mortus Discriminatus: Procedures in Targeted Killing.”

Most studies regarding the effectiveness of leadership decapitation against terrorist groups is based either purely on theory or case studies. Large $n$ studies would provide valuable perspectives on the effectiveness of this strategy, but unfortunately,

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40 Ibid., 26.
44 Johnson.
such studies barely exist. The most readily available are one somewhat large \( n \) (based on 60 cases) study on the topic, and two truly large \( n \) studies on the subject, both of which are in the process of being conducted by junior scholars.

In one of these studies, Aaron Mannes examined the effect of removing the top leaders of terrorist organizations on the organizations’ level of terrorist activity. He also compared the different means of removal (killing versus arrest) and looked at the effects of having leaders removed multiple times.\(^{45}\) His dataset represented 71 terrorist groups and included 60 instances of terrorist organizations losing their leaders. Mannes analyzed terrorist activity levels in the four- and ten-year periods surrounding leadership decapitation and tested them to see whether the loss of a leader resulted in 1) rapid disintegration of the targeted group, 2) an increase in terrorist activity, or 3) a long-term decline over the period of several years.\(^{46}\) He admits that many of the tests conducted in his study did not result in statistically significant outcomes. Although he found that there was a general decline in attacks when a group experienced leadership decapitation, he concludes leadership decapitation has little effect on the reduction of terrorist activity. The most notable trend Mannes identified was that decapitation strikes against religious terrorist groups tended to be followed by sharp increases in fatalities stemming from their attacks.\(^{47}\) He stated that his most statistically significant finding was that there was an increase of nearly 73 deaths in terrorist attacks following the killing of a religious terrorist group’s leader versus his arrest.\(^{48}\) Another statistically significant finding was

\(^{45}\) Mannes 2008, 40.  
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 41.  
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 40.  
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 43.
that religious terrorist groups that lost their leader for the second or third time increased their number of attacks afterwards.\textsuperscript{49}

Patrick Johnson, a current Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University, has been conducting a quantitative study on the effectiveness of leadership decapitation against insurgency groups. His findings are worth mentioning because many counterinsurgency groups use terrorist tactics and could also be classified as terrorist groups. As Audrey Cronin points out, terrorism has been closely intertwined with insurgencies throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{50} It is also important to note that Johnston is the only author mentioned in this paper who concludes leadership decapitation is an effective strategy (albeit, in counterinsurgencies versus counterterrorism). Analyzing a dataset of 168 insurgencies from 1803-1999, he concludes that leadership decapitation does work because it provides a marginal advantage to counterinsurgents.\textsuperscript{51} Johnston finds that leadership decapitation against insurgents raised the predicted probability of the counterinsurgency’s victory to 86%, which is a 46% greater chance of victory than when insurgent leaders were not captured or killed.\textsuperscript{52} He listed three possible explanations of this outcome: 1) killing or capturing a charismatic insurgent leader can break the morale of his followers, 2) killing or capturing an insurgency’s leaders can eliminate radicals and leave the group in the hands of more moderate leaders, and 3) killing or capturing an insurgency’s leadership can hinder the insurgency’s operational capabilities, especially planning and coordination.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{50} Cronin 2008, 52.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 8.
Jenna Jordan is conducting the most directly applicable statistical study to this thesis topic. Her large n study explores the questions of whether leadership decapitation is an effective counterterrorism strategy and under what conditions it results in the dissolution of terrorist organizations. Jordan’s study is more methodologically robust than other case study-based or quantitative studies discussed thus far because she not only considers groups who have experienced leadership decapitation, but also compares them to groups who have not. Jordan measures effectiveness in two ways. First, she determines whether decapitation is a decisive counterterrorism strategy and results in organizational collapse. To measure this, she applies a two-year criteria: if a terrorist organization is inactive two years after it experiences leadership decapitation measures, she codes it as a success. Second, Jordan looks at the extent to which decapitation results in organizational degradation and hinders a group’s ability to carry out attacks. Drawing on a comprehensive dataset of 290 cases from 1945-2004, her main conclusion is that leadership decapitation is not an effective counterterrorism strategy because overall, terrorist organizations declined at a higher rate when they did not experience the removal of their leaders.\textsuperscript{54} Her statistical analysis shows that decapitation is almost 20\% less effective than not targeting a terrorist group’s leadership at all.\textsuperscript{55} Jordan argues that when leadership decapitation is effective, it depends on key features of a group’s organizational structure, including the group’s age, type, and size.\textsuperscript{56} She also finds that religious terrorist organizations are less susceptible to leadership decapitation than purely ideological

\textsuperscript{54} Jordan 2008, 34.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 18.
One of her most interesting findings is that leadership decapitation is actually counterproductive against large, old, religious, and separatist groups.\textsuperscript{58}

Jordan’s analysis is the only one of its kind, but like any other large $n$ study, her findings are limited in that she cannot establish a causal link between leadership decapitation and the effects on a terrorist group. Her two-year criteria is problematic because a multitude of other factors undoubtedly influence a terrorist group after it experiences the loss of its leader, and her study cannot account for these factors. Counterterrorism forces generally use leadership decapitation as one of several strategies in combating terrorist groups. Jordan’s study can not and does not consider the effects of these other strategies on a group’s survival or demise. Additionally, Audrey Cronin writes that the median life-span for terrorist groups is just five to nine years.\textsuperscript{59} So, statistically speaking, it is very possible that groups (especially ones that were just a couple years old) were well on their way dissolution before they experienced decapitation. This means that Jordan could have counted some of these cases as decapitation successes even though the organization was already on a downward trend. Thus, it is very possible decapitation successes were over-counted and that leadership decapitation is even less effective than Jordan’s findings suggest.

Leadership decapitation is a complex and multi-faceted issue. Groups react differently during a crisis of leadership depending on whether the leader is killed, arrested, or dies of natural causes.\textsuperscript{60} Groups react differently based on whether its top

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{59} Cronin 2008, 24.
\textsuperscript{60} Langdon, et al 2004, 75.
\end{flushleft}
leader or its top echelon of leaders was removed. The characteristics of the force carrying out the decapitations also have implications on the reaction of a group.

Many of the authors reviewed here were quick to list the pros and cons of capturing and killing leaders. Capture allows a counterterrorism force to question the leader and potentially derive valuable information, but there is always a chance the leader will escape or be released and continue his or her ways. Killing makes certain a terrorist leader will never be able to contribute to his group’s operational capability again. However, history suggests that his followers might turn him into a martyr and use the opportunity to garner more public support.

Although experts are aware that the method in which a leader is decapitated matters, only a handful have attempted to compare the effectiveness of the two methods. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on whether capturing or killing terrorist leaders is more effective. Langdon, Sarapu, and Wells find that the assassination of a terrorist leader is more likely to cause a group to fail or disband than an arrest of the leader.\(^61\) In contrast, Cronin argues there is “clear evidence” that capture of terrorist leaders has been more effective than their death at the hands of an outside entity in a group’s ultimate demise.\(^62\) Johnston argues that both types of decapitation make counterinsurgents more likely to end an insurgency.\(^63\) Jordan discovered that the death of a leader correlated\(^64\) with the collapse of an organization in 29% of the cases while the arrest of a leader

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 67.
\(^{62}\) Cronin 2008, 29.
\(^{63}\) Johnston 2009, 28.
\(^{64}\) Jordan uses the phrase “results in” instead of correlates, but since she cannot establish a causal link, it is more appropriate to use the term “correlate.”
resulted in collapse in 20% of the cases.\textsuperscript{65} She admits, however, that this was not a highly significant finding in her statistical analysis.

Jordan also addressed the issue of targeting top leaders versus the upper echelon. She found that removing the top leader of a terrorist organization was more effective than targeting the upper echelon, but not by much.\textsuperscript{66} When the top leader was removed, the group fell apart 24\% of the time. When the upper echelon was removed, groups collapsed only 12\% of the time. When both the top leader and members of the upper echelon were removed in the same year, Jordan found that the organization fell apart at nearly the same rate as the removal of the upper echelon only.\textsuperscript{67}

The characteristics of a counterterrorism force carrying out decapitation measures undoubtedly have significant effects on terrorist groups. Local and international public opinion will be different based on the perceived legitimacy of the decapitator. Whether the decapitating force is a foreign state, domestic force, or rival faction are all important elements to consider, but studies that analyzed the implications of these differences on the effectiveness of leadership decapitation were not found.

A review of the literature surrounding leadership decapitation shows that experts generally believe that the strategy is not effective in seriously degrading or ending terrorist groups. Many of the authors drew from social network theory to explain that different types of organizations are more, or less, susceptible to decapitation. While the academic consensus is that leadership targeting is not an effective counterterrorism strategy, military professionals tended to focus on the pros of the strategy without giving its efficacy much evaluation, and argued that it was a valuable tool that needed to be

\textsuperscript{65} Jordan 2008, 21.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 20-1.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 21.
available to the United States in its counterterrorism efforts overseas. Jordan provided the only large study on the topic and found that surprisingly, terrorist groups that did not experience leadership decapitation tended to become inactive faster than terrorist groups who did lose their leaders. However, since her statistical analysis can only prove correlations, not causation, her findings are limited.

Based on this literature review, one could hypothesize that leadership decapitation against Islamist terrorist groups would not be effective, not only because studies found that the strategy was ineffective in general, but also because the literature suggests that leadership decapitation was the least effective against religious groups. The following case studies will provide insight into whether Islamist terrorist groups adhere to the current understandings of the efficacy of leadership decapitation.
CHAPTER III. CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

This paper approaches the question of the efficacy of leadership decapitation against Islamist terrorist groups by looking at three case studies: al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). These three groups are similar enough to conduct a comparative evaluation, but their backgrounds and experiences are also sufficiently different enough to compare differing variables. This sample includes two groups which experienced leadership decapitation by a foreign counterterrorism force and one which experienced decapitation by domestic forces and rival factions. Considering the nature of current US military engagements and the relevancy to policy, this study is limited to looking at Islamist organizations. The groups are also all locally operating terrorist groups (i.e. they do not conduct the bulk of their operations internationally). This is to exclude global al-Qaeda since it is such a large, internationally dispersed group. Because its networks extend to different continents, and since the organization and standard operating procedures of each major division of AQ vary widely, it would be extremely cumbersome to measure whether leadership decapitation by US counterterrorism forces in the Middle East and South Asia are affecting AQ worldwide.

Metrics

The ideal case studies for studying whether leader decapitation was successful would be terrorist groups that experienced decapitation several decades ago. This would allow for a larger dataset of incidents (or lack of incidents) following decapitation measures, making it possible to identify significant attack trends. However, two of the case studies experienced the loss of their top leaders fairly recently (within the last one or
three years). Therefore, it is still early to confidently assess the trends in their attacks following the removal of their leaders.

The ideal metrics for measuring whether leadership decapitation was effective against a terrorist group would include detailed information on its operational capability. For example, as a result of the loss of its leader(s):

- Has there been an improved or degraded ability for the group to plan terrorist operations?
- Has the complexity of a group’s terrorist attacks increased or decreased?
- Has the preparedness and quality of the group’s recruits increased or decreased?
- Is the group finding it easier or more difficult to recruit?
- Is the reaction of a group’s local population base as well as international public opinion facilitating or restricting its terrorist activities?
- Has the group’s ideological or political messages gained or lost influence?
- Has the group’s financial situation improved or deteriorated?

Ideally, the data for the above metrics would come from primary sources. Perhaps the most potentially valuable sources would come from well-placed human sources who could verify a causal link between the loss of a leader and the changes in a terrorist group’s operational capability and influence. Additionally, well-kept records would provide a wealth of knowledge. A group would ideally be obsessive book-keepers and with access to this information, we would be able to put together a good picture of their organizational structure, finances, personnel, and tactical capabilities. However, this information does not exist in any consistent, comprehensive, or confirmable manner.

The next-best method of determining the effectiveness of leadership decapitation against case studies is to evaluate their attack data. This provides a way to look at broad trends of a terrorist group. Despite not having the “ideal” information described in the
previous paragraphs, attack data is still valuable because it represents the strength, capability, and strategy of a group. Also, databases of terrorist attacks compiled by reputable sources have greater information fidelity than collecting the same information from a disparate collection of news sources. The main questions this paper will seek to answer from the attack data are:

- Have the group’s attacks increased or decreased in frequency?
- Have the group’s attacks increased or decreased in lethality?

Since this method of evaluating attack data is mostly a quantitative exercise, its findings are limited in the same way as other statistical studies are—trends in attacks following decapitation are only correlations, not results, of causation. Therefore, it is important to incorporate discussions of the group’s history, the involved counterterrorism force, and other variables such as public opinion since they are also factors that contribute to attack trends.

**Data: Sources, analytical methods, and caveats**

The attack data for the case study of AQI comes from the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database. The strength of this dataset is that it provides the most complete and consistent data relative to other existing datasets. However, there were several problems with the dataset itself. Most importantly, the GTD database did not list any AQI attack data from mid-June 2006 to mid-January 2007, and July-August 2007. Eight months of missing data in a case study which already has a relatively short time span is extremely problematic. It would not be too much of a concern if AQI was truly inactive during this time, but it is clear from a review of news sources that AQI was very active during these time periods, carrying out brutal attacks against both civilians and US
military personnel. A second problem which poses a challenge to the analysis is that the data ends in December 2007, which does not leave a long time period to evaluate trends following the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Second, in 17 out of the 101 attacks, either the number of fatalities or injuries is listed as “unknown,” meaning the lethality of the attack cannot be accurately measured. Third, there were three instances of double counting, where the same attack was entered twice. Despite the considerable imperfections of the data, this database was used because it provided the most consistent and thorough information.

Data for the TTP comes from the National Counterterrorism Center’s World Incidents Tracking System (WITS) database, which had the most comprehensive TTP attack data. However, the value of this data is limited because it only deals with attacks from TTP’s formation in December 2007 until the end of September 2009. Since Baitullah Mehsud was killed in Aug 2009, there is not a sufficient amount of data to establish attack trends following his death.68

Data for the GIA case study comes from the Global Terrorism Database. The GDT provided the most extensive, comprehensive, and consistent data for the group, covering the dates from February 1994 to January 2005. The weakness of the dataset, however, is that there is no data for the time period between mid-2003 to the end of 2004. Although GIA had lost most of its operational capabilities by then, a review of news sources shows GIA was still active in conducting terrorist attacks during those years.

**Limitations in the ability to generalize**

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68 I considered completing the dataset by augmenting it with suicide attack data from the Pak Institute for Peace Studies and the South Asia Terrorism Portal, but while these websites included data on suicide attacks in Pakistan up through 2010, I was unable to determine the consistency between their data and WITS’ data. Thus, it would have been methodologically problematic to attempt to augment the WITS’ data myself.
While the case studies will hopefully provide some thoughtful insight into the effectiveness of leadership decapitation in counterterrorism, there are some major limitations to the ability to generalize their findings. First, although the individual case studies are based on the evaluation of a relatively large amount of attack data, the sample only includes three terrorist groups. With such a small sample, it is not possible to draw strong generalizations about decapitation against Islamist terrorist groups as a whole.

Second, terrorist organizations operate in extremely complex political and social environments, making it difficult to claim a causal link between leadership decapitation and a specific effect on the group. In the discussion of assassination, Havens, Leiden, and Schmitt warned that it is difficult to measure the impact of assassination since every political system is in a constant state of change and thus it is difficult to determine how much a change can be attributed to any single event.69 Similarly, Aaron Mannes cautions, “Terrorist organizations decline and become ineffective for many reasons. Even groups that maintain formidable capabilities over decades may have periods of relative inactivity. Variability in terrorist activity may be an issue inherent to these organizations and therefore an unreliable indicator of the effectiveness of a given policy.”70 Considering there is so much variability within the study of a single group, one must be careful not to directly apply the experiences of one group upon another.

In addition to the limitations of data availability and quantitative studies, evaluating the effectiveness of counterterrorism in general poses obvious challenges. It is difficult to have a completely accurate and current picture of a terrorist group because we can only evaluate it based on what we can see and what has happened in the past. While

70 Mannes 2008, 41.
we can count the number of attacks, we will never hear about plots that were not implemented or are still in the planning stages. Similarly, we will likely never know the extent to which a terrorist group has created sleeper cells that have not yet been activated.

However, this study does provide an opportunity to gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of leadership decapitation. It advances the problems inherent in large $n$ studies by not only looking trends from attack data, but also by exploring the historical and contextual factors of each case to find alternative explanations for these trends. This will provide stronger support for conclusions that leadership decapitation was or was not the cause of changes in a terrorist group’s operational capability.
CHAPTER IV. AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ

Background

Prior to 2002, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (born Ahmad Fadil Nazzal al-Khalayleh), a Jordanian, was the head of a small terrorist group called al Tawhid (Unity of God) whose primary aim was to overthrow the secular Jordanian monarchy which it saw as un-Islamic and overly friendly toward Israel. In 2002 Zarqawi arrived in Iraq, and by 2004, he had founded a coalition of jihadist movements under the aegis of Tawhid wa’l Jihad (Monotheism and Struggle). In October 2004 Zarqawi swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden and joined al-Qaeda, renaming his organization to Tanzim Qa’idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (commonly referred to in the West as al-Qaeda in Iraq). At this time, the group had between 1,000 and 1,500 fighters.

AQI’s operations began after Apr 2004 when the United States started military operations in Fallujah. In contrast to bin Laden, Zarqawi fervently argued that al-Qaeda’s “Near Enemy” (apostates and Shi’ites) were more dangerous than its “Far Enemy” (the United States and the West). Thus, Zarqawi’s primary targets were Iraqi Shi’ites. He committed to attacking the far enemy only as far as to fulfill his obligations to the greater al-Qaeda and did so only when convenient targets of opportunity presented themselves. Zarqawi’s goal was to incite civil war between Iraqi Sunni and Shi’a.

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73 The number of fighters comes from a study prepared by the Iraqi intelligence services in 2004, as discussed in Brisard (2005, 134).
74 Brisard 2005, 138.
76 Schliep 2007, 30.
AQI targeted people and places that symbolized stability and progress in Iraq, including civil services and government officials, in order to create panic and distrust in the local population.  

**Analysis of attack data**

On 7 June 2006, Zarqawi was killed when a US F-16 fighter aircraft dropped two 500-pound bombs on his safe house about 40 or 50 miles north of Baghdad. Current theories on the effectiveness of leadership decapitation do not clearly predict whether AQI should have been susceptible to decapitation. On the one hand, AQI was a relatively young organization when Zarqawi was killed, suggesting it should have been vulnerable to leadership decapitation. On the other hand, it was an extremist religious group, a type that has consistently shown to be most resistant to the effects of decapitation.

The attack data shows that the frequency, lethality, and sophistication of AQI’s attacks decreased following Zarqawi’s death. The vertical red line indicates the time Zarqawi was killed.

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78 Schliep 2007, 29.
Figure 1. Number of AQI attacks by month, 2004-2007

The chart below shows the number of casualties (fatalities and injuries) caused by AQI attacks by month.

Figure 2. Number of casualties from AQI attacks by month, 2004-2007

Source: Global Terrorism Database, http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/
The attack data also reveals that the technical sophistication of AQI’s attacks decreased following Zarqawi’s death. While prior to June 2006 a majority (approximately 70%) of AQI attacks involved bombs and explosions, after June 2006, only about 45% of AQI attacks involved bombs and other explosives. Prior to June 2006, armed assaults (which this paper considers less technically sophisticated than explosives attacks) constituted only about 13% of AQI’s attack, but in the period following his death made up the majority (40%) of attacks.

The attack data, when viewed by itself, shows that that AQI’s operational activities declined following Zarqawi’s decapitation. However, once other contextual factors are considered, it becomes apparent that there are too many other variables that could have had an effect on AQI’s decline. The first factor is that is unclear how important Zarqawi was to the functioning of his organization at the time of his death. There are debates on both sides. Randy Schliep argues that due to Zarqawi’s personal connections, relationships, and reputation, he was a crucial link to his organization’s future.81 He claims Zarqawi was not only a charismatic leader, but that that he was also essential to the functioning of the group by leveraging his connections with other organizations in Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to finance and provide logistical support for his group.82 He explains that Zarqawi provided unique strategic leadership by maintaining the autonomy of the group and making decisions that defined AQI, such as the decision to foment a civil war between the Sunni and Shi’a by attacking civilians.83

81 Schliep 2007, 56-57.
82 Ibid., 72.
83 Ibid., 12, 57-8.
Schliep also argues that Zarqawi was clearly the primary decision-maker in planning the details of AQI attacks.  

Other experts dismiss this view. Jean-Charles Brisard argues Zarqawi’s influence has been exaggerated. Brisard believes Zarqawi was not a great strategist and that he became notorious only due to his “brute force” against the US forces in Iraq. Lee Teslik argues Zarqawi was catapulted onto the international stage not by merit, but due to Colin Powell’s speech to the United Nations Security Council in 2003 where he claimed Zarqawi was the link between Iraq’s Baathist regime and Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda network. Although this claim was later disproved, Teslik claims this brought Zarqawi undeserved international attention which helped boost his standing by creating the perception he was Iraq’s leading coordinator of terror. Similarly, a high-level Jordanian intelligence official opined “the Americans” blew Zarqawi completely out of proportion and caused his prestige to grow. Thus, the question of Zarqawi’s level of influence as a strategic and tactical leader remains uncertain. If it is true that he did not play a significant strategic or tactical role in AQI at the time of his death, then the reduction of the number and deadliness of AQI’s attacks cannot be attributed to his decapitation.

A second factor that likely contributed to the decline in AQI operations is the Iraqi population’s increasing anger against AQI’s brutal tactics. Since the support of a local population is necessary for a terrorist group to survive, this is a plausible variable in its decline. Throughout the summer of 2004 AQI attacked symbols of stability and political progress, assassinating political leaders and targeting military and police

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84 Schliep 2007, 72.
85 Brisard 2005, 133.
86 Teslik 2006.
87 Weaver 2006.
recruiting stations, busy markets, and police checkpoints. Later in 2004, AQI became known for its brutal kidnappings and video-recorded beheadings. In November 2005, Zarqawi bombed three hotels in Amman and was immediately criticized throughout the Arab world. In the months following the attacks, several Sunni insurgent groups (Zarqawi’s former allies) agreed to reconcile with the Iraqi government, suggesting AQI’s tactics were increasingly being considered unacceptable. Most famously, in September 2006, several tribes in Iraq’s Anbar Province publicly denounced AQI in a conference called “The Day of Awakening.” In response to weakening public support, in October 2006, AQI reorganized and changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). This was an attempt to rebrand and distance itself from the brutal tactics implemented by Zarqawi as well as to broaden its appeal to Iraqi Sunnis and jihadi scholars outside of Iraq. The reduction in AQI attacks following Zarqawi’s death could be seen as a response to local public opinion rather than the removal of Zarqawi. Critics of this view would point out that AQI’s sensitivity of public opinion would not have been possible had Zarqawi still been in power. Regardless, we cannot rule out the possibility that Iraqi public opinion had a significant impact on the ability of AQI to carry out fewer attacks.

A third factor which undoubtedly had a hand in reducing AQI’s operational capabilities was US counterterrorism efforts in the rest of the country. The United States, as a foreign military force with “boots on the ground,” actively implemented several counterterrorism strategies aside from leadership decapitation which adversely affected

88 Schliep 2007, 29.
89 Ibid., 31.
90 Ibid., 32.
91 Brian Fishman, “Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned From Inside al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 16 Mar 2009, 3.
A.QI. In order to create an environment less conducive to extremism, the United States shut down known safe haven and training facilities while making efforts to address the grievances of local groups, communal conflicts, and societal structures. The “surge” of troops in Iraq in 2007 is also credited to bringing stability to many previously dangerous areas of the country. Thus, it is very likely that US counterterrorism strategies in Iraq also contributed to the decrease in AQI attacks.

**Assessment**

Although AQI is still an active terrorist group, the attack data suggests it is a declining one. AQI remains capable of generating large-scale asymmetric attacks, but it is unable to control territory with the same freedom it could during Zarqawi’s time. It is unclear to what extent Zarqawi’s decapitation caused AQI’s decline since several other important but immeasurable factors contributed to this trend. It is therefore impossible to determine whether leadership decapitation was effective against AQI. Experts tend to agree with the view that a collection of variables resulted in AQI’s reduced operations.

Brian Fishman argues that the United States facilitated AQI’s decline by killing and capturing key leadership, disrupting communications and logistics processes, and giving the local tribes a legitimate path to political participation. He furthers that it was the rejection of AQI by local Sunnis that discredited and degraded the organization. Peter Bergen, Joseph Felter, Vahid Brown, and Jacob Shapiro argue “tribal disaffection, the

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94 Peter Bergen, Joseph Felter, Vahid Brown, and Jacob Shapiro, Brian Fishman ed., Bombers, Bank Accounts, & Bleedout: Al-Qa’ida’s Road In and Out of Iraq, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Jul 2008, 6.

95 Fishman 2009, 30.

96 Ibid.
surge in Coalition and Iraqi Forces in 2007-2008, and AQI’s self-destructive penchant for violence’’ all contributed to the organization’s decline.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{97} Bergen et al.
CHAPTER V. TEHRIK-I-TALIBAN PAKISTAN

Background

In December 2007, Baitullah Mehsud founded and became the chief of TTP. It was an umbrella organization for about thirteen disparate militant groups and is the largest organization of its kind operating in the North-West Frontier Province. Mehsud formed the group to pool the resources and manpower of Pakistan’s Taliban against state security forces. His main goals were to implement shari’a and to force the Pakistani government into signing a peace accord so its power and interests were protected. The group also claimed it would extend assistance to the Afghan Taliban and fight against US and International Security Assistant Force (ISAF) troops in Afghanistan, but their operations have almost exclusively been limited to Pakistan.

To further their aims, TTP has targeted the limited administrative infrastructure in tribal areas, educational institutions (particularly girls’ schools), tribal leaders, residents perceived to be involved in “immoral activities,” as well as people or symbols that do not conform to its particular interpretation of Deobandi Islam, including barber shops and DVD/CD stores. In February 2008 the Pakistani government called for a temporary ceasefire, and in May of that year, Baitullah Mehsud agreed to ask his men not to attack

99 Hassan Abbas, ed., Pakistan’s Troubled Frontier (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2009), 8;
the Pakistani military but still vowed to continue carrying out attacks against ISAF.\textsuperscript{102}

The attack for which TTP is most famously linked is the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007.\textsuperscript{103}

\textit{Analysis of attack data}

Current theories of leadership decapitation would have mixed predictions about the removal of Mehsud. On the one hand, the theories would hypothesize TTP was vulnerable to leadership decapitation since it was a new organization and thus likely dependent on his charismatic leadership. On the other hand, TTP was very much a religious extremist organization, a class of terrorist groups which has proven to be the most resistant to leadership decapitation. Since the organization was barely two years of age at the time of Mehsud’s death, the theories would predict that his death would result in the decline of the organization’s attack levels. However, considering TTP has had a history of internal discord and disagreements between its local commanders\textsuperscript{104} and that there has been no evidence that the group ever acted as a coherent entity under Baitullah Mehsud,\textsuperscript{105} it is likely that the group was one that was not highly vulnerable to leadership decapitation.

On 5 August 2009, Baitullah Mehsud was killed by a US Predator strike. In the month immediately following his death, the number of TTP attacks declined. The red line indicates the time of Mehsud’s death.

\textsuperscript{102} Abbas 2009, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{103} Ali 2006, 55.
\textsuperscript{104} Yusufzai May 2008, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{105} C. Christine Fair, “Pakistan’s Own War on Terror: What the Pakistani Public Thinks,” \textit{Journal of International Affairs} Vol. 63, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 2009), 41.
Even though the number of attacks decreased following his removal, the number of victims actually increased.
Since the dataset ends just one month after the death of Mehsud, we cannot determine whether the group’s operational activities truly increased or decreased after his death.

The debate as to whether US drone strikes have been effective against TTP continues. Imtiaz Ali argues that drone strikes have had a major effect on TTP operations, and that in an effort to avoid them, TTP members have been limiting their militant activities and seeking rest and shelter to cities such as Quetta and Karachi.\textsuperscript{106} However, critics argue US Predator strikes only inspire more attacks from TTP, pointing to the fact that TTP has carried out attacks claiming they are in retaliation for the drone strikes.\textsuperscript{107} Many argue US drone strikes have been counterproductive to counterterrorism efforts in Pakistan because of the effects of civilian deaths on public opinion. Dan Byman claims US strikes resulting in civilian casualties have been a blow to US legitimacy and its efforts to build goodwill in the country.\textsuperscript{108} A Brookings Institute report estimates ten civilians died for every militant killed in drone attacks\textsuperscript{109} while the Pakistani government claims that from 2006-2009, US strikes in Pakistan killed 14 militants and 687 civilians.\textsuperscript{110} These figures serve to raise anti-US sentiments among the local population.

In May 2009 General Petraeus assessed anti-US sentiment was increasing in Pakistan, “especially in regard to cross-border and reported drone strikes, which Pakistanis perceive to cause unacceptable civilian casualties.” He reported that almost two-thirds of Pakistanis opposed counterterrorism cooperation with the United States and that 35% did not support US strikes into Pakistan even if they were coordinated with the government.

\textsuperscript{108} Byman 2009.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
of Pakistan and the Pakistan Military. TTP has capitalized upon the negative public opinion against the US by using drone strikes to legitimize striking government targets. Mehsud is reported to have attacked a police academic in Lahore "in retaliation for the continued drone strikes by the United States in collaboration with Pakistan on our people," and several weeks later, his successor Hakimullah Mehsud told reporters the TTP would “continue to launch suicide attacks until US drone attacks are stopped.” Pakistani Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani also agreed drone strikes “do no good, because they boost anti-American resentment throughout the country.”

Interestingly, however, civilians living in areas where US drone strikes occur generally support them. The local populations bitterly resent TTP’s brutal rule and are therefore far less critical of the drones. Anthropologist Farhat Taj explains these residents would prefer to be protected by the Pakistani Army but feel powerless toward the militants and view the drones as their “liberator.”

Assessment

The time period for TTP attack data was too short to allow for trend analysis. However, what is clear from a review of news reports following the death of Baitullah Mehsud is that his decapitation did not result in a significant decline in the organization’s attack capabilities. A cursory review of news sources from August 2009 onwards shows that actually, TTP is still very much active in carrying out terrorist attacks. In fact,

114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
Hakimullah Mehsud seems to be even more brutal than his predecessor. Hakimullah was killed by a US drone strike in January 2010, but in the months following his death, TTP seems to be carrying on with “business as usual.”

Despite an awareness of the negative repercussions of drone strikes, many Western experts believe they should continue. Bruce Riedel supports the use of drones, arguing that only they are able to put pressure on al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan.116 Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann explain that since a ground assault into Pakistan’s tribal regions is out of the question, drone strikes are the “least bad” option for the United States in reducing the threat from Pakistan’s militants.117

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117 Bergen & Tiedemann.
CHAPTER VI. THE ARMED ISLAMIC GROUP OF ALGERIA

Background

The Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (Groupes Islamiques Armés, GIA) was the most radical of Algeria’s armed Islamist movements.\textsuperscript{118} In the mid-1990s the group distinguished itself through its extreme cruelty and savagery, repeated rejections of negotiated settlements, and the targeting of intellectuals, journalists, and foreigners.\textsuperscript{119} In their decade-long campaign of violence, GIA is estimated to have killed 150,000 people.\textsuperscript{120}

In the 1980s Algeria was home to a fervent Islamist scene. Out of this grew a homegrown Armed Islamic Movement which advocated the violent overthrow of the secular Algerian government and the introduction of Islamic law. These and other, more moderate, forces came together in 1989 to form an Islamist party called the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, or FIS).\textsuperscript{121} In 1991 Algeria seemed to be on the verge of becoming the most democratized state in the Arab world, but in that year’s parliamentary election, the FIS received twice as many votes as the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).\textsuperscript{122} This was a complete shock to the Algerian government and its armed forces. The army executed a bloodless coup, installed its own man, and declared a state of emergency, dissolving the 400 local councils controlled by the FIS and throwing the

\textsuperscript{119} “Islamism, Violence And Reform In Algeria: Turning The Page,” International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 29, 30 July 2004, 16.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Vidino 2006, 136.
\textsuperscript{122} Cronin 2009, 155.
party’s founders into jail.\textsuperscript{123} Adding insult to injury, the new regime cancelled elections scheduled for January 1992 in order to prevent the likely shift of power back to the FIS.\textsuperscript{124} Algeria plunged into a brutal civil war and the FIS began small-scale terrorist violence, mostly targeting government officials.\textsuperscript{125} Disagreements within the FIS soon led to splits within the group. Out of this factionalization rose a loosely aligned group of smaller gangs known as GIA.\textsuperscript{126} Within a few months, GIA had replaced the FIS as the main Islamist group fighting the Algerian government.\textsuperscript{127}

GIA distinguished itself by being against any compromise. It became the most feared Islamist terrorist group in the country during the mid-1990s by attacking schools, army posts, the police, and civilians believed to be pro-government. The group also declared jihad on “infidels” and all foreigners, causing an exodus from Algeria.\textsuperscript{128} GIA received international notoriety with the hijacking of an Air France passenger aircraft in Algiers in December 1994.\textsuperscript{129} By 1997 however, the savagery of Algeria’s civil war had escalated to the point where their indiscriminate tactics were resulting in the loss of support from the majority of Algerians in both Algeria and Europe.\textsuperscript{130}

\textit{Analysis of attack data}

Current leadership decapitation theories would have mixed predictions as to whether leadership decapitation would be effective against GIA. Like AQI and TTP, GIA is a religious organization, and thus, this would have made it less vulnerable to the effects

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item Vidino 2006, 136.
\item Ibid.;
\item Cronin 2009, 156.
\item Cronin 2009, 156.
\item Vidino 2006, 136.
\item Ibid.
\item Vidino 2006, 139.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
of the loss of its top leader. However, since the organization did have a lifespan of about ten years, once could hypothesize that leadership decapitation should have become less effective as the organization got older since older, religious terrorist organizations are the most resistant to leadership decapitation. The fact that GIA was a decentralized organization would add weight to the prediction that leadership decapitation would not likely have a significant effect on its operational capabilities. GIA operated as an agglomeration of armed groups dispersed over at least nine zones, each of which operated under an appointed amir who was nominally committed to the central leadership.\textsuperscript{131}

Looking at attack data alone, one might be tempted to conclude leadership decapitation theories correctly explain the case of GIA since the frequency of its attacks dropped suddenly and permanently following the death of its first leader in 1996. The vertical red lines indicate the times a GIA top leader was killed or arrested.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Number of GIA attacks by quarter, 1994-2005}
\end{figure}

The chart below reveals that GIA’s attacks also became less lethal over time.

\textsuperscript{131} Mohammed M. Hafez, Armed Islamist Movements and Political Violence in Algeria, \textit{Middle East Journal} Vol. 54, No. 4 (Autumn, 2000), 575-6.
However, looking at GIA’s history, it becomes obvious that it is impossible to determine whether leadership decapitation was or was not responsible for the group’s decline. This is because the decapitation of its leaders was almost the norm rather than the exception over its lifetime. Further complicating the matter is that the decapitation of GIA’s top leaders occurred through the hands of a mix of actors, not just a legitimate counterterrorism force. Inter- and intra-group rivalries all had a hand in removing GIA leadership. Therefore, it is not possible to attribute a decline in attacks to leadership decapitation by Algerian security forces. The following table presents a rough timeline and description of the loss of GIA leaders.
Figure 7. Timeline of GIA’s loss of top leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Method of leadership removal</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Rival faction</td>
<td>In July 1996, GIA leader Djamel Zitouni was killed by one of the FIS’ breakaway factions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Leadership decapitation—killed</td>
<td>In February 2002, GIA leader Antar Zouabri was killed in a gun battle with security forces. He was GIA’s longest-serving emir.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Internal rivalry</td>
<td>In July 2004, GIA leader Rachid Abou Tourab was allegedly killed by his close aides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Leadership decapitation—captured</td>
<td>In November 2004, Nourredine Boudiafi was arrested in the outskirts of Algiers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Leadership decapitation—captured</td>
<td>In April 2005, Boulenouar Oukil was arrested by state security forces.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at the history of leadership removal in GIA, it is not surprising that experts attribute the decline of GIA to reasons other than leadership decapitation or other counterterrorism measures. Inter-group rivalries considerably distracted the group. In January 1996 GIA became involved in an officially declared “war” with Armée Islamique du Salut (also known as AIS or the Islamic Salvation Army), the former military wing of the ISF. Some experts argue GIA and AIS organized and formulated their views with an eye on each other more so than with an eye toward the regime. GIA also became weakened by internal rivalries as battles for leadership led to internal divisions that sparked the establishment of other armed groups. One of these groups was Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). The GSPC broke away from GIA in 1998 in protest of its attacks on civilians and soon replaced GIA as the most active

133 Hafez 2000, 582.
134 Hafez 2000, 584.
terrorist group in Algeria. GIA is still considered to be an active terrorist group by the United States, France, and Algeria, but in 2005, the Algerian government declared "almost all" of GIA had been "broken up."\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} "Algeria's top GIA rebel captured," BBC News, 29 Apr 2005.
\textsuperscript{137} "Algeria ‘breaks up GIA terrorist network’," afrol News, 3 Jan 2005.
CHAPTER VII. LEGAL & NORMATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

This study has largely focused on the effects of leadership decapitation on the operational capability of terrorist groups. However, it is worthwhile to mention that normative and legal issues surrounding this topic also have an important impact on the effectiveness of the strategy in US counterterrorism.

It is no secret that the rules of engagement in warfare are never black and white. However, leadership decapitation—particularly targeted killing—in counterterrorism presents some unique normative and legal challenges. Current laws regarding targeting in military operations are based heavily upon just war theory. Stemming from this theory are two clusters of rules: rules specifying when and how soldiers can kill, and whom they can kill. These rules prove to be extremely blurry in counterterrorism. In terms of the “when and how,” in conventional wars, soldiers are justified in killing enemy combatants during a legally declared war when an enemy force is posing an immediate danger to them. However, targeted killing separates the use of lethal force from the exigencies of emergency combat situations. This issue is most apparent in the case of US drone strikes in Pakistan. In terms of the rules on “who” soldiers can kill in war, the concept of distinction (i.e., target selection) can become very confusing in counterterrorism. According to rules of engagement, attacks may only be conducted against military objectives. Many terrorists, however, are part-time fighters and part-time civilians, wear no uniforms or distinctive insignia, and are considered by many legal experts to not

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139 Plaw 2008, 3-4.
140 Other relevant legal issues include the fact that the United States is not legally at war with any elements in Pakistan, which is likely a major reason drone strikes in the country remain covert and are handled by the Central Intelligence Agency rather than the US military.
qualify as legal combatants. This makes it difficult to classify most terrorists as strictly civilians or combatants. Although it is accepted that counterterrorism encounters more legal and normative challenges than traditional forms of warfare, there is still a high level of criticism against the United States for overstepping the accepted rules of war in its war against al-Qaeda.

Not all experts are pessimistic about the implications of counterterrorism or counterinsurgencies on the integrity of international norms and law. Michael Schmitt argues counterinsurgency is different from traditional warfare in a positive way. According to Schmitt, international law was designed for classic attrition warfare where each side tried to wear down the enemy until they could no longer continue fighting. Both sides sought to avoid excessive restrictions on their military actions while still trying to ensure the protection of their civilian populations. In counterterrorism or counterinsurgency however, the countering force seeks to win hearts and minds through “persuasive” warfare, which involves influencing the local population, and to a lesser extent, influencing international public and governmental opinion. Schmitt argues that in Afghanistan, the United States has often adopted restrictions on its operations that far outstrip those found in law.

The debate over whether leadership targeting by US forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are “right” or “legal” matters simply because other nations care that the United States abides by international norms and laws. Targeted killing is not widely accepted as a legitimate instrument of the state, and thus, the United States risks

142 Ibid., 328.
143 Ibid.
diminishing its status as an “upholder of the rule of law.”\textsuperscript{144} There are real and tangible implications stemming from this criticism. Perceptions of America’s use of the leadership decapitation have a direct impact on the type and level of international support the United States can receive. Dan Byman explains:

“The United States must consider the goodwill of its allies... International condemnation of US actions directly affects US counterterrorism efforts since much of Washington’s ‘war on terrorism’ is waged with or in cooperation with other countries’ police and security services... A decision by Germany, Malaysia, Morocco, or other states with a major jihadist presence to stop actively cooperating with Washington could be devastating.”\textsuperscript{145}

In short, the United States has to care if it wants to be successful.

\textsuperscript{144} Byman 2006, 106.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 108.
CHAPTER VIII. CONCLUSION & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This paper reviews current theories in leadership decapitation and applies them to three Islamist terrorist groups. The main finding from the analysis of attack data for AQI, TTP, and GIA is that leadership decapitation is not correlated with the reduction of terrorist activities of these groups. Theories on leadership decapitation fail to predict the increase or decrease in a group’s attack capabilities in a consistent or reliable manner. In all three cases, experts heavily attribute the change in a group’s operational capability to other factors and considerations, such as the characteristics of the counterterrorism force (or the lack of one altogether), public opinion, the role of the top leader within an organization, and the existence of internal and factional rivalries.

Currently, the United States feels pressured to continue implementing a counterterrorism strategy that includes leadership decapitation. The belief, as reflected in the most widely circulated academic literature as well as military papers, is that killing terrorist leaders and operatives is one of the “few options left” for the United States to dismantle terrorist safe havens and reduce the operational capabilities of the groups.\(^{146}\) Leadership decapitation is particularly attractive to the United States because it exploits America’s immense air power advantage, can be executed in a short period of time, and minimizes combat losses.\(^{147}\) It is also one of the few tangible outcomes that can be reported to the American public as “evidence” that the United States is making “progress” on the war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

The key lesson policy-makers and military planners can take away from this study is that the experiences and outcomes of leadership decapitation against one terrorist group

\(^{146}\) Byman 2009.

\(^{147}\) Pape, 2003.
should in no way be directly applied to or expected in another. Although there is value in the large $n$ studies being conducted by junior scholars like Jenna Jordan and Patrick Johnston, counterterrorism planners should not use these findings to justify a strategy of leadership decapitation. This study illuminates the fact that every terrorist group, even ones that are often lumped into the same category (e.g. “Islamist terrorist groups”), is vastly different. Each group’s characteristics and environment will make its reactions to leadership loss unique. The case studies in this paper demonstrate it is nearly impossible to measure the effects of leadership decapitation because of the difficulties in attributing changes in terrorist’s behaviors or capabilities to just one variable.

Although it may be difficult for US military planners to scale back the use of leadership targeting, it would be wise for them to begin considering some other options for future counterterrorism efforts. For instance, Jenna Jordan interestingly discovered that terrorist organizations decline at a higher rate when they did not experience the removal of their leaders.\(^\text{148}\) Despite the limitations of large $n$ studies, her findings still provide food for thought. Perhaps the option of not targeting leaders (i.e., “doing nothing”) should be explored as one of these “other” options. Regardless, the important lesson from this study is that policy-makers and military planners must deeply consider other contextual factors when evaluating leadership decapitation as a possible counterterrorism strategy. These include a counterterrorism force’s capabilities, local public opinion, a terrorist group’s organizational characteristics and dynamics, as well as the awareness that many times, succeeding “top leaders” of terrorist groups have been more brutal than their predecessors.

\(^{148}\) Jordan 2008, 34.


Fishman, Brian. “Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned From Inside al-Qa’ida in Iraq.” The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. 16 Mar 2009.


