Headhunting: Evaluating the Disruptive Capacity of Leadership Decapitation on Terrorist Organizations

Ted Clemens IV

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Comparative Politics Commons, Defense and Security Studies Commons, International Law Commons, International Relations Commons, Military and Veterans Studies Commons, and the Other Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1225

This Thesis is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
HEADHUNTING
EVALUATING THE DISRUPTIVE CAPACITY OF LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION ON TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

by

TED CLEMENS IV

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016
HEADHUNTING
EVALUATING THE DISRUPTIVE CAPACITY OF LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION ON TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

by

TED CLEMENS IV

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

__________________________

PETER LIBERMAN

__________________________

Date Thesis Advisor

__________________________

ALYSON COLE

__________________________

Date Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

**Headhunting**
Evaluating the Disruptive Capacity of Leadership Decapitation on Terrorist Organizations

by

Ted Clemens IV

Advisor: Professor Peter Liberman

What are the circumstances that allow a decapitation strike to be optimally effective in destabilising a terrorist group? What effect does decapitation have on the terrorist groups that experience them? Is there a causal correlation between the type of terror group experiencing decapitation and a typology of effects? Analysts and scholars alike are rightly skeptical of the viability of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy. However, the efficacy of decapitation has less to do with whether it is uniformly implemented as a counter-terrorism mechanism and more to do with the conditions, timing, structure, and aims of the extremist group in question.

Based on the review of several terrorist groups that vary in age, size, active region, message, and internal structure, I argue that the younger a group is, the more hierarchical its structure, and those groups that relied purely on ideology or religious oppression to sustain activity were several times more vulnerable to degradation or disintegration from leadership removal. To this end, I posit that terrorist organizations can also experience a correlative typology of effects, post-decapitation. This suggests that policy-makers and scholarship would benefit from a less binary view on the usage of decapitation and its effectiveness. Rather, like all strategic options, targeted killings or arrests of militant leadership should be weighed against other appropriate stratagem and only implemented under the favorable conditions in order to maximize the potential outcome.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1  
Data & Methodology ............................................................................................................ 4  
Arguments for Leadership Decapitation .............................................................................. 7  
Literature Review ................................................................................................................ 11  
Arguments Against Leadership Decapitation ...................................................................... 15  
Literature Review ................................................................................................................ 17  
Leadership Decapitation Factors .......................................................................................... 21  
Age of Terrorist Organizations ............................................................................................ 21  
Structure of Terrorist Organizations .................................................................................... 22  
Internal Motivation of Terrorist Organizations ................................................................... 23  
Case Studies .......................................................................................................................... 23  
Sendero Luminoso & Abimael Guzman ............................................................................. 23  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 29  
Al-Qa’ida & Usama bin Ladin .............................................................................................. 30  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 35  
Abu Sayyaf & Khadaffy and Abdurajak Janjalani ................................................................. 36  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 40  
The LTTE & Vellupai Prabhakaran and Tamil Leadership .................................................... 42  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 47  
The PKK & Abdullah Ocalan ............................................................................................... 48  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 51  
The CE & Dokka Umarov .................................................................................................... 53  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 56  
Aum Shinrikyo & Shoko Asahara ....................................................................................... 59  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 62  
Hamas & Yahya Ayyash ...................................................................................................... 65  
*Measuring Success & Effects* ........................................................................................... 68  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 71  
Policy Implications .............................................................................................................. 76  
Bibliography ........................................................................................................................ 78
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Number of Shining Path Incidents (1980 – 1992)…………………………………………………………… 29
Figure 1.2 Number of al-Qa’ida Incidents (2001 – 2013)......................................................................................... 35
Figure 1.3.1 Number of ASG Incidents (1991 – 2000)............................................................................................ 40
Figure 1.3.2 Number of ASG Incidents (1998 – 2008)............................................................................................ 41
Figure 1.4 Number of LTTE Incidents (1983 – 2009).............................................................................................. 47
Figure 1.5 Number of PKK Incidents (1984 – 2002)............................................................................................... 52
Figure 1.6 Number of CE Incidents (2007 – 2014)................................................................................................. 57
Figure 1.7 Number of Aum Shinrikyo Incidents (1989 – 1997).............................................................................. 63
Figure 1.8 Number of Hamas Incidents (1992 – 1998).......................................................................................... 68
Headhunting
Evaluating the Disruptive Capacity of Leadership Decapitation on Terrorist Organizations

David ran, and stood upon the Philistine, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head. And when the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they scattered.¹

1 Samuel; Chapter 17: 51

Introduction

Is leadership decapitation by arrest or assassination sufficient to collapse a terrorist organization? What are the conditions that are most suited to decapitation's success? What are the effects of leadership decapitation? Is there a typology of effects correlative to the attributes of different terror groups? What pronouncements can policy-makers issue on the future use of a targeted killings or arrests? No assassination has captured public attention and perpetuated popular interest during the twenty-first century like that of Usama bin Ladin in the early summer of 2011. Americans in particular were fascinated by the final months of al-Qa’ida’s, once prolific Senior Operations Chief and self-proclaimed emir. Articles, novels, televised interviews, documentaries, and major motion pictures, all mirrored the interest in the targeted killing and disposal of America's 'highest value target'².

Midnight celebrations on Pennsylvania Avenue and the streets of New York City marked the somewhat morbid satisfaction felt by the U.S. public in the immediate aftermath of bin Ladin’s death. Media reports that the now-deceased leader had been viewing videotapes of pornography – which, in actuality, contained operational information and instructions for potential terrorist activity – in his final months, circulated as citizens as well as the United States government waited to see what immediate repercussions his assassination would have for subsequent counterterrorism efforts. Yet, what has Usama bin Ladin’s death over a decade after the attacks of September the 11th yielded in terms of culling al-Qa’ida the organization? Were we removing an immediate threat to American interests, or were we out for revenge? More importantly still, what can this instance of targeted killing tell scholarship and researchers about the ramifications of leadership decapitation in terror groups?

¹ 1 Sam. 17: 51 KJV.
Targeting the leadership of terrorist organizations has become a critical goal of the counter-terrorism policies of several countries, including the State of Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States, to name a few. In spite of the reluctance of states to overtly admit that terrorist leadership are explicitly targeted, because of the legal dubiousness of targeted strikes, the rhetoric of the White House makes clear that leaders are more often than not the targets of counter-terrorism campaigns. President Bush’s 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, spoke to the importance of removing the leadership of terrorist groups in order to impede future acts of terror:

Leaders, who provide the vision that followers strive to realize. They also offer the necessary direction, discipline, and motivation for accomplishing a given goal or task. Most terrorist organizations have a central figure who embodies the cause, in addition to several operational leaders and managers who provide guidance on a functional, regional, or local basis. The loss of a leader can degrade a group’s cohesiveness and in some cases may trigger its collapse.

The Obama administration seems to view leadership decapitation as being part of an effectual, grand counter-terrorism strategy; President Obama stated in a 2011, White House brief that leadership extrication was a mark of the coalition’s success against terrorism.

In the past two and a half years, we have eliminated more key al-Qa’ida leaders in rapid succession than at any time since September 11, 2001, including Usama bin Laden, the only leader that al-Qa’ida had ever known. As a result we now have the opportunity to seize a turning point in our effort to disrupt, dismantle, and ultimately defeat al-Qa’ida.

Regardless of the lack of consensus on the part of scholarship as to whether decapitation is effective, or even counterproductive, it is clearly a symbolic if not prudent choice for those nations that employ it and will be into the foreseeable future.

A significant amount of the research conducted on decapitation strategy in the years subsequent to 9/11 would seem to suggest that targeted killings and arrests are insufficient to
derail a terrorist organization (Mannes, 2008, Cronin, 2009, Hafez & Hatfield, 2006, Jordan, 2009 & 2014, Langdon et al., 2004, Boaz, 2005). Robert Pape, in both *Dying to Win* and *Bombing to Win*, maintains that targeting enemy leaders ‘has never been effective’³ to halt terrorist activity and that policies of decapitation ‘have met with meager success’⁴. Jenna Jordan suggests that the ‘marginal utility’ of leadership decapitation is ‘actually negative’⁵. The divide between state implementation of decapitation strategy, even as a broader part of a counter-terrorism strategy, and the reticence of scholarship to embrace it illustrate, if anything, that any conclusions gleaned from decapitation research thus far are preliminary at best.

This paper argues that in spite of the lack of consensus, there are certain conditions that increase the likelihood that leadership decapitation will result in group degradation or death: namely the operational age of the group, its design structure, and its core motivation for carrying out attacks point to the group’s susceptibility to organizational death by means of decapitation. I support the argument that (a) groups that have existed for twenty years or longer will be generally less susceptible to leadership decapitation, while younger ones may unravel or become operationally stagnant. I also further the argument that (b) groups with hierarchically structuring, who are dependent on their leadership are more susceptible to organizational death after leadership has been removed, while groups whose leadership is not formalized, centralized or does not require leadership to act, will be less vulnerable. Lastly, I reaffirm that (c) groups motivated by nationalism or separatism are uniquely difficult to curb, while religious and ideological groups are often susceptible to decapitation when their values or beliefs are undercut by law enforcement or dwindling, popular support. The more of these factors that aggregate within a specific terrorist group also contribute to the likelihood that the group will suffer organizational degradation or collapse.

My contribution to the leadership decapitation literature is the presence and maturation of particular, effects that are correlative with the type of terrorist group that experiences leadership decapitation. Much has been said and written about whether or not leadership decapitation is an efficacious strategy for its desired outcome, however, little examination of the specific after-effects of decapitation has been conducted by scholarship. Further, those who do look to the aftermath of decapitation for making pronouncements on the strategy’s

effectiveness, often only regard the operational continuation or cessation of terrorist activities as measures of success and failure. Instead, I argue that given the varied typology and objectives of terrorist groups, success and failure cannot be accurately be measured in such narrow parameters. Rather, through analysis of the aftermath of decapitation on the type of groups stated above, I argue that the success and failure of leadership decapitation occupy a vast, subjective grey area.

I test the hypothesis that there are causally correlative effects, engendered by leadership decapitation, and linked to a specific typology of terrorist group. That is, (a) When hierarchically structured groups experience leadership decapitation, they either seek to rebrand themselves in a grasp for legitimacy (e.g. name a successor with less violent aspirations, look for political recognition, reorient themselves as community-based organizations, or all of the aforementioned) or face organizational collapse. (b) When religious or ideological groups are targeted by authorities they enter a ‘spiral of amplification’ which leads to increased violence on the part of the group. Targeting the group causes a supernova-like effect, whereby a group increases the number and/or severity of attacks in the correct assumption that they are nearing organizational collapse, before in effect, dissolving. (c) When religious homogeneity and interests of nationality (i.e. cultural cleavages) aggregate, the potential for acts of terrorism – especially suicide terrorism – increases, and with it, the likelihood that leadership decapitation will be ineffectual.

Issues in my research include varying definitions of ‘operational success’ in measuring the success of decapitation, a terrorist organization’s ability or perceived necessity in successor naming, and the examination of decapitation solely on a case by case basis which make effective comparisons among groups largely generalizing. Yet, so long as decapitation remains a consistently utilized tool in the counter-terrorism repertoire of many states; it may serve researchers and policy-makers to better observe the circumstances under which decapitation is most likely to yield favorable results.

Data & Methodology

Along with a review of previous, scholarly work on leadership decapitation, and government agency reports, I will utilize statistical data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) as data sets provided by START. I make use of the GTD generated chart primarily
because of the criteria for ‘terrorism’ that it imposes. Acts of terrorism ‘must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal’. The search parameters also require that there is verifiable evidence of an intention to ‘coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience(s) than the immediate victims’ and that the incident occurred outside of the ‘context of legitimate warfare activities’ – i.e. not within the recognizable or permitted actions of international humanitarian law, the laws of armed conflict, and all laws therein regarding the ‘admonition against deliberately targeting civilians or non-combatants’. These highly specific criteria – in my view – compound the reliability of the data generated by the GTD’s advanced search, and thus allow for more intelligible conclusions to be drawn.

I make use of the GTD to compile verified incidents of terrorism from the date of decapitation up to two years from the time of leadership decapitation, as well as specifying the method of attack (e.g. suicide or non-suicide attack, biological weapon, bombing or explosion, etc.). Once the chart representative of the data is generated, I follow up each data set with an evaluation of the results, controlling for other potential factors that may influence the data’s results.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows: First, I provide a brief outline of the arguments for and against leadership decapitation. These sections examine, primarily, the efficacy or inefficacy of leadership decapitation, however, some of the authors who are reviewed provide secondary advantages and disadvantages to the practice (e.g. legality, popular support, etc.) which are also mentioned here. I proceed by conducting a concise review of the literary and academic source I reference throughout my paper. These reviews are divided by their support or opposition to the efficacy of the practice of leadership decapitation.

Third, I distill from the sources examined what I hold to be the three fundamental, determining factors that contribute to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of leadership decapitation in terrorist groups – these factors being, the age, structure, and internal motivation of the groups themselves. I suggest, as many scholars have similarly, the strengths and weaknesses of age as a factor in determining the outcome of decapitation strikes. Next, I lay out the reasoning behind the assertion that groups that are structured hierarchically are more vulnerable to decapitation than horizontally structured groups where leadership is unclear.

Lastly, I discuss the factors implicit in the assertion that motivation of terrorist groups also plays a role in whether or not they are sensitive to leadership decapitation.

Fourth, I examine several case studies of terrorist organizations that have experienced one or more episodes of leadership removal and I apply the criteria of age, structure, and internal motivation to discern the degree of their impact on the ultimate outcome of each instance of decapitation. The case studies include; Abimael Guzman and Shining Path, Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida, Abdurajak and Khadaffy Janjalani and the Abu Sayyaf Group, Velupillai Prabhakaran and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, Shoko Asahara and Aum Shinrikyo, Dokko Umarov and the Caucasus Emirate, and Yahya Ayyash and Hamas.

Fifth, I present my conclusions on the case studies examined, the degree to which they comport with or contradict the suggestions of the scholars I reference, and my thoughts as to why decapitation was ultimately effective or ineffectual in bringing about organizational dissolution or death. Further, I include a brief section on the relevant policy implications that I maintain emerged from my research.

Definitions

As Stephanie Carvin readily admits, ‘there is no consensus as to what the term [leadership decapitation] actually means or how it should be defined’\(^7\). She points to instances of scholarship using the term ‘decapitation’ as referring to ‘assassination’\(^8\) or ‘targeted killing’\(^9\).

For the purposes of this paper however, leadership decapitation will broadly refer to the intentional, direct arrest or killing of an individual due to their discernable membership – and perceived leadership – of a terrorist organization. Definitions of ‘terrorist leadership’ can be understood as referring to either the foremost leader of a terrorist organization or any member within the upper ranks of the organization who holds a position of authority. Finally, for purposes of assessing the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of a decapitation operation, this paper defines ‘operational success’ as whether or not a terrorist organization was operationally inactive for two years.

---

following the incident of decapitation. A two year period of inactivity is designated by the U.S. State Department for declaring a Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) operationally inactive, making it a viable benchmark against which to gauge my research.  

Arguments for Leadership Decapitation

Scholars and counterterrorism analysts who are advocates of leadership decapitation view even a marginal utility to the strategy as proof that it is a policy path worth pursuing. However, none among decapitation’s supporters would or do suggest that targeted killing or arrest of terrorist leadership is an efficacious, stand-alone strategy. Rather, they view it as one tool in a repertoire of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency stratagem. For proponents, the stated goals of leadership decapitation are effective on their face in that the strategy accomplishes no less than what it suggests – the removal of leadership from its position of authority or ability to influence operations. The immediate effect of leadership decapitation is fundamentally that the leader is no longer in a position to provide the group with the tools that had made them an effective leader, advocates of the practice contend. In so doing, a group can be deprived of skilled personnel with explosives expertise, a charismatic individual with galvanizing potential, a figure of religious authority, or perhaps a combination of several of the aforementioned abilities who is not readily replaceable. Patrick Dear succinctly states this benefit in saying ‘targeted killing aims ultimately to reduce the number and lethality of insurgent attacks’.

Leadership decapitation, advocates suggest, offers a plausible, short-term, means of achieving this.

Daniel Byman suggests that ‘the number of skilled terrorists is...limited. Bomb makers, terrorist trainers, forgers, recruiters, and terrorist leaders are scarce’. Moreover, finding a competent replacement for a predecessor can prove a difficult task when a terrorist group is ducking counterterrorism measures designed to keep the group in a defensive posture. Robert Pape, who has suggested that removing leadership is not an effective military strategy, admits in *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* that terrorist groups are forced to consider the prospect of a ‘limited human capital’ with regards to sacrificing personnel.

Although Pape uses the term in reference to a limited number of suicide bombers, the same

---

logic applies to leadership. Similarly, Bryan Price contends that leadership decapitation is ultimately an effective policy because of the nature of terrorist groups themselves. Price argues that because of the organizational structure of terrorist groups as ‘clandestine, values-based, and violent,’ these factors ‘amplify the importance of leaders’ and subsequently makes leadership succession more difficult. With new leadership hard to find, terrorist groups can ‘attract recruits, but lacking expertise, these new recruits will not pose the same kind of threat’ according to Byman14.

Proponents of leadership decapitation also argue several secondary benefits to the strategy. Stephanie Carvin suggests that ‘the most important of these benefits is the idea that [leadership decapitation] disrupts terrorist organizations, throwing them into chaos and preventing them from planning future attacks’15. This period of chaos in which terrorist organizations are not necessarily ‘dead’ but operationally inactive allows more long-term, counterterrorism operations to take effect, advocates of the policy argue. ‘To avoid elimination, the terrorists must constantly change locations, keep those locations secret, and keep their heads down, all of which reduces the flow of information in their organization and makes internal communications problematic and dangerous’, Byman writes16. Steven David makes a similar point in succinctly remarking that ‘targeting killing also keeps potential bombers and bomb makers on the run’ 17. The leaders of terrorist organizations are often responsible for maintaining these components of their organization, hence, in their absence, remaining clandestine becomes all the more arduous. Patrick Dear echoes the importance of disorienting and dislodging terrorist groups from their places of safety through leadership decapitation. Dear writes, ‘in the short term [leadership decapitation] disrupts planning by forcing remaining leaders to reduce meetings with others, avoid traceable communication devices, move often, and to trust caution to avoid detection and reduce their vulnerability’18.

Remaining in the shadows too has its drawbacks for terrorist organizations. Familiars such as friends, family, and associates all become sources of constraint, whereby attempting contact one could be tantamount to assuring one’s own capture or death. Byman contends that

these stressors aggregate, so that ‘operatives cannot visit their parents or children without risking death’ 19. The excessive precautions necessary to maintaining clandestine status amidst counterterrorism measures designed to unseat you by its very nature drains terrorists of the resources, time, and stability necessary to planning subsequent terrorist acts. In this regard, disrupting terrorist behavior through leadership decapitation is a notable advantage.

For advocates, the proportionality of leadership decapitation and the relative ease and simplicity with which it can be executed provides an added benefit to the strategy. In lieu of lengthy and expensive invasions or occupations – which have the added worry of potential nation-building in their aftermath – leadership decapitation is cost-effective. Steven David in Fatal Choices, notes that ‘targeted killings do not ‘employ large numbers of troops, bombers, artillery and other means that can cause far more destruction than they prevent’ 20. When considering this, one is forced to acknowledge that highly targeted, aerial strikes, or a team of military operators is far more proportional than a major incursion.

David again contends in Israel’s Policy of Targeted Killing, that ‘Targeted killing is discriminatory in that it focuses exclusively on one’s adversaries. Civilian casualties and collateral damage are minimized. It is proportionate in that only enough force is used to accomplish the task’ 21. Minimizing collateral and civilian casualties also means maintaining international and IGO coalition support for such policies, as well as domestic support. In terms of cost-effectiveness, Johnston in The Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation in Combating Insurgencies contends that removing a top insurgent leader increased the chances of terminating costly campaigns in the year following the leader’s removal by roughly twenty-five percent 22. Johnston adds that while this says little about the outcome of the decapitation campaign itself, it does imply averting the substantial costs of future efforts to counter terrorism.

The focused nature of targeted killings is in itself a benefit noted by many of its advocates as a justification of its continued usage. Under the rationale of its proponents, the narrow focus of targeted killings minimizes civilian deaths and collateral damage. Counterintuitive as it may seem, Carvin suggests that the use of targeted killing as a

20 David, Steven R. “Fatal Choices”. p 121.
counterterrorism strategy ‘actually saves lives’\textsuperscript{23}. The threat of death acts as a deterrent factor for potential terrorists, at the very least giving them pause. David Rohde, a journalist for the New York Times who was kidnapped by Taliban affiliates in 2008, noted that the audible sound of drones overhead instilled the fear of death in his captors. The Taliban kidnappers did not come outside during the day and did not amass in groups for fear of being seen or killed\textsuperscript{24}.

Or, as David argues, many terrorists would rather be captured alive than killed in the field. He writes, ‘when the Israelis informed the [Palestinian Authority] whom they were after this information was often passed to the targeted individuals so that they knew they were being hunted. Some voluntarily chose to place themselves in custody to avoid being slain\textsuperscript{25}. For detractors of leadership decapitation who argue against the legality of assassination, this potential benefit not only spares the lives of civilians, but also of the terrorists themselves. Price discusses the consequences of when terrorists turn themselves into the authorities. He remarks that even ‘capturing, or capturing then killing the leader – significantly increase[s] the mortality rate of terrorist groups’\textsuperscript{26}. Terrorist leadership does not need to be killed in order to be rendered ineffective.

Often, the reality of targeting leadership for assassination or capture means that the latter is highly improbable. Still, it is possible that an excessively perilous operation to apprehend terrorist leadership could inadvertently result in the death of the individual or individuals, and further endanger the lives of the operatives conducting the mission. Under these circumstances, targeted killing as a method of leadership decapitation is pragmatic if not the only viable option. For Amitai Etzioni, ensuring ‘security requires preventing attacks rather than prosecuting the perpetrators after the attack’. He contends that endangering the lives of soldiers or operatives in order to subject terrorists to the rule of law is not a rational response for ‘terrorists who are willing to commit suicide during their attack...and who will pay no mind to what might be done to them after their assault’. Still, for those heavily invested in the cause for

\textsuperscript{25} David, Steven R. "Fatal Choices". p 120.
which utilizing terrorism as a means to an end, Etzioni argues that they are ‘prepared to proceed despite whatever punishments the legal system may throw at them’ 27.

In this limited regard, assassination is a preferable method of leadership decapitation. For terrorists who are in hiding, exile, or protected by states who may alert them to international counterterrorism operations targeting them, targeted assassination as a form of leadership decapitation is the most effective way in which to prevent a specific leader from continuing to plan attacks. Using the model of Pakistan and al-Qa’ida, Byman suggests that detaining terrorists in the Federated Tribal Regions ‘is almost impossible today; the Pakistani government does not control many of the areas where al Qaeda is based, and a raid to seize terrorists there would probably end in the militants escaping and U.S. and allied casualties in the attempt’ 28.

**Literature Review**

Daniel Byman’s *Do Targeted Killings Work?*, as well as Steven David’s *Fatal Choices* and *Israel’s Policy of Targeted Killing* are foremost concerned with leadership decapitation’s benefits as they pertain to targeted assassination. More specifically, the two are focused on Israel’s policy of targeted killing and measuring its success against Hamas. Both authors utilize data gathered from the First and Second Intifadas, given that the latter produced Israel’s counter-measure of targeted killing. In this sense, the scope of their empirical and quantitative data as well subsequent assessments of leadership decapitation are rather limited in providing a temporally long, stream of data from which to make pronouncements about potential after-effects. Similarly, the effects of observing the repercussions of targeted killing exclusively will yield different results from those that also compare arrest records with targeted assassinations.

Byman’s somewhat sanguine assessment of Israel’s assassination campaign after the Second Intifada appears to stem from the statistics on Israeli death tolls between 2002 and 2005. He cites a National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) figure that quotes Israeli deaths as a result of terrorism at approximately 185 in 2002. However, the number of dead decreased to 45 in 2003, 67 in 2004, and 21 in 2005. Separate data from the MIPT also suggests that while the number and frequency of terrorist incidents attributed to

---

Hamas rose between 2001 to 2005 – by an 842% increase – the efficiency and number of casualties did not increase.²⁹ Byman suggests that:

- as the number of attacks grew, the number of Israeli deaths...plunged, suggesting that the attacks themselves became far less effective. The lethality rate rose from 3.9 deaths per attack in 2001 to 5.4 in 2002. Then, in 2003 the rate began to fall, dropping to 0.98 deaths per attack that year, 0.33 in 2004, and 0.11 in 2005.³⁰

Byman’s research highlights the apparent success of leadership decapitation in the case of Israel and Palestinian-borne, terrorist activity. According to Byman, the mere fact that there are less successful attacks points to a lack of coordination among terrorists, which in turn decreases the efficiency of future attacks. While the scale of Byman’s study is comparatively, quantitatively small to other studies such as Jenna Jordan’s – where nearly 300 episodes of decapitation are analyzed over a 60 year period – his postulation that ‘something more than correlation was at work here’ bears out.³¹

Steven David’s assessments of the Israeli targeted killing campaign draw more tentative conclusions than those espoused by Byman. David contends, as many proponents of leadership decapitation do, that while ‘targeted killing has been unable to stop terrorism’, its merit cannot be judged from its viability as a singular strategy. That being said, David often relies upon counterfactual claims to underpin his arguments for leadership decapitation. In one section, he concludes his claim by stating ‘it is possible that even more Israeli civilians would have been killed if not for the policy’ ³². It is also possible that without the state-sponsored assassination policy, the number of Israeli casualties would have plateaued in response to tried, counterterrorism measures, or increased from internal pressures within Hamas. David offers no definitive answer as to why the presence of a targeted killing policy would directly correlate with fewer dead Israelis.

David makes his most compelling argument for leadership decapitation, however, in ‘Fatal Choices’, where he posits that ‘Israel’s policy [of targeted assassination] has hurt the

---

³⁰ Byman, Daniel. "Do Targeted Killings Work?" p. 103.
³² David, Steven R. "Israel's Policy of Targeted Killing." p 118.
capability of its adversaries to prosecute attacks'\textsuperscript{33}. This claim is one also voiced by Byman, Johnston, and Price – once terrorists are altering their behavior for fear of being killed, they are subtracting time, effort, and money from conducting acts of terrorism. David writes:

There is some evidence that targeted killings have reduced the performance of terrorist operations. Israelis estimate they stop over 80 percent of attempts, and the incidence of poorly planned attacks...indicates that there have been problems either with the organization of the operations or with those available to carry them out.\textsuperscript{34}

This would suggest that the poor planning and implementation of terrorist attacks witnessed by Israeli security forces was causally correlated with the continued practice of targeting middle and upper level Hamas members.

Bryan Price, in ‘Targeting Top Terrorists’, offers a theory-based explication on the efficacy of leadership decapitation. He finds that terrorist groups are susceptible to leadership decapitation because of the very nature of the groups themselves. Price argues that because terrorist organizations operate clandestinely, and are ‘values-based’ leadership transitions are made more difficult\textsuperscript{35}. He alludes to the concept of the charismatic leader as well as the cohesiveness innate to violent organizations as proof that leadership succession would not be a simple endeavor in the event that a leader is removed. To wit, terrorist organizations are inherently dependent upon their leadership.

Price’s assessment of leadership decapitation is constrained by the parameters of his theoretical model, which assumes the characteristic of value-centricity is true of all terrorist organizations. One can see how this presumption could skew results. However, when considering terrorist organizations, it is difficult to come up with many groups that do not – at their core – use terrorism in furtherance of some agenda, ideal, or belief.

Johnston, in \textit{Does Decapitation Work?}, also finds that leadership decapitation is an insufficient strategy in and of itself to ensure the organizational collapse of a terrorist or

\textsuperscript{33} David, Steven R. “Israel's Policy of Targeted Killing.”. p 119.
\textsuperscript{34} David, Steven R. “Israel's Policy of Targeted Killing.”. p 120.
\textsuperscript{35} Price, Bryan C. ”Targeting Top Terrorists”. p 14.
insurgent group. While he concludes that 'the data...[shows] conclusively that killing or capturing...leaders is usually not a silver bullet,' Johnston also contends that his 'results do not support the common argument that the costs of failed targeting outweigh the benefits of successful targeting' 36.

Johnston's methodology and datasets are significantly larger and more comprehensive than those of Price or Byman. Using the START's Terrorist Organizations Profiles database, Johnston focuses mainly on 'plausibly exogenous' episodes of leadership decapitation. Johnston defines 'plausibly exogenous' as overt or documented efforts to assassinate or capture leadership that reached operational level and excludes ones that do not 37. Using this method, Johnston arrives at 118 attempts to remove terrorist leaders – 46 of which were successful, or 39%. Examining this data, Johnston finds that 'neutralizing insurgent leaders has a substantively large and statistically significant effect on numerous metrics of countermilitancy effectiveness' 38. He further notes that following decapitation, groups were 25 to 30 percent more likely to suffer organizational death.

Johnston’s study is most notably limited by a myopic focus on the viability of leadership removal in insurgencies. As Jenna Jordan notes, ‘although some terrorist groups are also insurgents, many insurgent organizations do not employ terrorist tactics’ 39. Where Price relies on a theory-based model to drive his analysis, Johnston is missing a core, theoretical discourse on leadership decapitation. Johnston makes little effort to mention an implementation strategy for leadership decapitation, namely, when it should or should not be employed by states. Nor does he discuss the operational implications for leadership removal for their organizations, or more basically, why decapitation is an effective strategy. A further criticism is Johnston’s non-subscription to the notion of a ‘Martyrdom Effect’, writing that he ‘found no evidence’ of it 40. The term denotes the process whereby the death or capture of leader can result in subsequent veneration of him or her by their respective group. However, one need look no further than the many Hamas leaders and operatives who, after being assassinated by the Israeli

counterterrorism apparatus, were memorialized in the names of schools, plazas, streets, and offshoot groups (e.g. the Disciples of the Martyr Yahya Ayyash [DOMYA]).

Patrick Dear’s article, *Beheading the Hydra*, offers a qualitative approach to understanding the ramifications of leadership decapitation on terrorist and insurgent groups. Unique among similar studies on the effectiveness of leadership decapitation, Dear conducts a series of interviews with experts, analysts, and insiders ‘in order to bridge the gap between the academic and military debates’. Less uniquely, Dear finds that leadership decapitation vis-a-vis assassination ‘can have an advantageous tactical effect...in certain limited and specific circumstances,’ and ‘as part of a wider strategy’ 41. Dear makes an interesting assessment of the perils of the overuse of leadership decapitation, arguing that ‘it does not follow that a repeated use of targeted killing will cause a greater reduction in insurgent capability. Insurgent networks adapt in response to targeted killing, changing structure and dispersing capability to ensure their resilience’ 42. The implications of Dear’s argument, are primarily that leadership decapitation does not allow for the tactical landscape to remain constant after its usage. Rather, those who target militant leadership will have to do so sparingly in order to maximize its utility.

Dear is especially critical of the ‘opaqueness’ of the process of designating and executing decapitation maneuvers on militant groups. He cites a UN Special Rapporteur’s report on the Extrajudicial, Summary, and Arbitrary Executions brief on the lack of oversight and scrutiny on this process in countries like Israel where leadership decapitation campaigns are heavily institutionalized. While Dear does well to reference the lack of transparency in oversight, one would think after interviewing military personnel on such operations, he would be able to appreciate – if only partially – the import of discretion and minimal oversight. High-value targets are often alerted by leaked or less secure government countermeasures, designed to ensnare or eliminate them. Congressional or Supreme Court review, for example, of the methods by which the United States government and affiliated agencies carry out decapitation operations would bring a wider consciousness to the issue, and possibly limit its applicability while it remains under review. This would constrain the already limited applicability recommended by Dear for the usage of leadership decapitation.

42 Dear, Keith Patrick. "Beheading the Hydra". p 323-324.
Arguments Against Leadership Decapitation

For those that oppose targeted killing – a potential measure for leadership decapitation – there are the legal and ethical ramifications for considering policy of assassination or extrication. However, for scholarship, the issue of reprisals or ‘backlash effect’ as Audrey Cronin calls it, is of primary concern. Many authors suggest that should a terrorist group interpret the targeting of their leadership as an establishment of the rules of engagement, there is no plausible guarantee that such groups would not utilize a similar strategy in targeting the state leadership that opposes them. Cronin mentions this fact in How Terrorism Ends, wherein she argues that state ‘governments are at a serious disadvantage, especially democratic states: public figures cannot be perfectly protected; indeed, a major aspect of most elected politicians’ jobs is to be visible and available, making them more vulnerable to assassination than the leaders of clandestine organizations’ 43. For Cronin, the susceptibility of democratic leaders to assassination – or potentially kidnapping – constitutes a reason for pause when considering making use of leadership decapitation as a strategy for countering extremist violence. The fear of backlash effect is amplified when states employ ‘repressive counterterrorism’ measures, which Cronin warns can be sufficient for halting an insurgency or terrorist activities, but ultimately undermine state credibility.

Al-Qaeda has demonstrated the tit-for-tat mindset, as Byman calls it, when espousing a rationale for its attacks. Usama bin Ladin has stated that ‘America does not understand the language of manners and principles, so we are addressing it using the language it understands’. He goes on to accuse the United States of ‘stealing our wealth and oil’ as well as ‘[occupying] our countries’, claiming that those killed by American campaigns and policies ‘must be equally revenged’. Bin Ladin’s statements demonstrating the readiness with which terrorists organizations incorporate the tactics used to undermine them as a rationalization for violence44. For leaders of terrorist organizations, the sentiment that ‘the oppressed have a right to return the aggression’, as Usama bin Ladin put it in his Letter to America45.

For detractors of leadership decapitation, the adage ‘better the devil you know than the one you don’t’ rings true. There is no guarantee that once a leader of a terrorist organization is removed, his or her replacement will be more amenable reducing violent activity – they could very likely view the hostile measures that removed their predecessor as a reason to become more hardened and violent themselves. Cronin speaks to this, writing that ‘the original charismatic leader may indeed be irreplaceable, or he may not...It is not at all guaranteed that the successor will be an improvement, from a counter-terrorism perspective’ 46. There was a strong reticence among analysts and scholarship, for example, to condone the assassination of the former leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Velupillai Prabhakaran, for fear that his confidante and militia leader, Colonel Shankar, would replace him. Colonel Shankar was almost universally considered among Indian army intelligence as being more ruthless than Prabhakaran47. Shankar was known for routinely ordering his Sea Tigers unit to execute prisoners, especially those who were from military or intelligence aparati. Removing a leader, in the case of the LTTE, would have likely resulted in a more brutal leadership regime, one less attuned to other, less violent means of de-escalation.

Detractors also contend that the often bureaucratized ranks of terrorist organizations – referred to as ‘organizational resilience’48 – allow for a timely and efficient leadership turnover. Jordan makes this argument, among others, in Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark as to why and how leadership decapitation strikes fail to bring about organizational collapse. Jordan writes:

Many terrorist organizations are hierarchical: their authority comes from the top; and they have an administrative staff; they follow rules and standard operating procedures; and they maintain functionally separate branches and infrastructure. Even clandestine organizations such as terrorist groups can organize themselves bureaucratically 49.

---

If bureaucracies operating within the financial sector operate in a similar capacity as terrorist organizations – the argument that Jordan makes – then their bureaucratic apparatus should allow for relatively smooth leadership transitions.

Most notably, detractors point to the difference between leadership decapitation and its outcomes in theory and in practice – the latter being wholly uncertain. Again, Cronin speaks to the uncertainty surrounding the after-effects of leadership removal, stating that those who advocate the practice ‘must think not only tactically but strategically, analyzing the second and third-order effects of the removal of terrorist leaders...Removing the leader may reduce a group’s operational efficiency in the short term, or it may raise the stakes for members of a group to “prove” their mettle by carrying out dramatic attacks’ 50.

**Literature Review**

One of the most adamant opponents of leadership decapitation stratagem, Jenna Jordan argues first in *When Heads Roll* (2009) and again in *Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark* (2014), that the policy is ineffective at best. In the former, Jordan approaches the issue with an objective mindset, setting out to determine why leadership decapitation has variable success. Her research observes what conditions favor group collapse; if the strategy increases the probability of organizational death, and barring its successful implementation, if the strategy has any deleterious effects or hinders operational capacity. Her quantitative, research model is developed from a dataset of 298 incidents of leadership decapitation over a sixty-one year period (1945– 2004). Jordan’s dependent variable is ‘coded according to two different measures of effectiveness: decisiveness and organizational degradation’ 51. She defines terrorist leadership as ‘either the top leader of an organization or any member of the upper echelon who holds a position of authority within the organization’, and operational success by whether ‘an organization was inactive for two years following the incident of decapitation’ a measurement she gleaned from the U.S. State Department’s process of labelling of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)52. Jordan’s regression analyses lead her to conclude that terrorist

---

organizations rarely end after their leadership is killed or captured, labelling the effort a ‘misguided strategy’ and stating that it is ‘actually counterproductive’.\(^{53}\)

Jordan’s research runs into a problem when she includes studies on Israel’s policy of leadership decapitation during the Second Intifada (Al-Aqsa). The issue here is twofold: first, leadership decapitation, as employed by the Israeli military and Shin Bet, involved exclusively targeted killing operations, rarely taking suspected or confirmed terrorists into custody; and second, as Steven David noted, Israeli counterterrorism efforts did not solely target ‘top leaders,’ or those of ‘the upper echelon’. Rather, Shin bet regularly designated mid-level terrorists who were seen as ‘important enough to disrupt a terrorist cell but not so important as to provoke retaliation’.\(^{54}\) In this context, one of Jordan’s primary empirical sources does not comport with the parameters of her own research in significant enough ways to skew the data.

Jordan’s 2014 article, entitled *Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark*, appears less definitive on leadership decapitation’s ineffectiveness. The crux of her argument in this article centers upon the organizational resilience of terrorist groups – their ability to resist collapse through an efficient mechanism of leadership turnover – and the bases of popular support that ensure group survival. Jordan contends that as groups age, they lend themselves to bureaucratization, realized through intricate, internal structuring, and preparation for contingencies such as leadership removal.

A shortcoming of ‘Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark’ lies in Jordan’s theory of bureaucratization in so far as it too heavily relies on the comparison between terrorist organizations’ behavior and the actions of non-criminal organizations, i.e. private sector companies. She argues that ‘Even clandestine organizations such as terrorist groups can organize themselves bureaucratically,’ which increases ‘stability by making organizations capable of surviving leadership turnover’.\(^{55}\) Her claim that bureaucratization decreases ‘the likelihood of organizational failure’ relies on a theory of Economics understanding of bureaucratization.\(^{56}\) This is evidenced by the sources she cites for the value of bureaucracies – over a dozen management and economics journals – that ignore the notion that terrorist groups

---

are continuously being scoured for weaknesses by which to be exploited and ultimately dismantled.

Terrorist organizations routinely suffer from systemic, exogenous – and potentially endogenous – shocks that can psychologically and physically impact the terrorist group in a way it would not impact a legitimate organization. A CEO would not lament replacing his or her predecessor in an large-scale, commercial organization, however a successive terrorist leader may reconsider leading a terrorist group whose last several leaders were assassinated in gory fashion, or captured, tortured, and imprisoned indefinitely.

In ‘Testing the Snake Head Strategy’, Aaron Mannes compares 81 episodes of leadership decapitation, beginning in 1968. Mannes’s definition of leadership decapitation is noticeably more focused in that ‘the only events taken into consideration were those that affected either the organization’s leader or second in command’. Mannes follows Jordan’s tract of observing the first two years after leadership removal to determine organizational operability, but also adds a five-year observation mark to also gauge long-term outcomes. He determines success by ‘decreased activity, reflected in lower numbers of incidents and killings in the period of time after the event’\textsuperscript{57}. Mannes’s regression leads he him to skeptically conclude that ‘the limited effect of the decapitation strategy, particularly on fatal attacks by terrorist groups raises doubts about its overall efficacy’. Mannes notes the potential for utility in removing leadership with a decline in episodes of terrorism sometimes resulting from leadership removal. However, this fails to meet his standard of organizational death and two to five-year inoperability. While Mannes himself believes that ‘in order to better understand the impact of decapitation strikes, more data is necessary’, his own research parameters suggests that leadership decapitation is not a viable or sustainable strategy, but can prove counterproductive\textsuperscript{58}.

Hafez and Hatfield, in their article, \textit{Do Targeted Assassinations Work?}, provide an interesting counter-balance to Steven David’s examination of Israel’s response to the Second Intifada. The two examine the policy of targeted killing juxtaposed with the rates of Palestinian violence in Israel from 2000 to 2004 during the period of the al-Aqsa uprising. Hafez and Hatfield are foremost concerned with whether:

\textsuperscript{57} Mannes, Aaron. “Testing the Snake Head Strategy” p. 41, 42, 43.
\textsuperscript{58} Mannes, Aaron. “Testing the Snake Head Strategy” p. 43, 44.
targeted assassinations produce a disruption effect and diminish violence over time...the number and success rate of attacks in the long-run as militant groups suffer the loss of experienced cadres and commanders, and allocated precious resources to secure the remaining leadership.\textsuperscript{59}

They determine that ‘targeted assassinations have no significant impact on rates of Palestinian violence, even when time lags associated with possible reactive retaliations are taken into account\textsuperscript{60}. Further, they contend that there are little to no ramifications as pertaining to an increase or decrease in levels of violence, directly contradicting arguments made by David\textsuperscript{61}. Instead, the authors suggest that a range of defensive initiatives from more robust security at checkpoints to increased law enforcement presence may account for the decrease in violence.

Hafez and Hatfield’s research and the pronouncements they make from it are limited foremost by the scope of their study. The limited time span for observability – a period of four years – and a small empirical pool – the case of Israel and the first and second Intifadas – does not convey the degree of certainty necessary to say with conviction that targeted assassination ‘should not be presented as a proven solution to patterns of political violence and rebellion’\textsuperscript{62}. While their evidence does suggest that targeted killing had no impact on levels of violence, many factors, such as the importance of popular support by Palestinian, non-combatants, are not considered.

\textit{Audrey Cronin’s How Terrorism Ends} is arguably the most comprehensive appraisal of leadership decapitation and its place in counterterrorism by virtue of the sheer number of empirical sources utilized, as well as her analysis of them. Her first chapter, ‘Decapitation: Catching or Killing the Leader’, offers insight into how leadership decapitations can end terrorism and what ramifications it has in the long-term. Of the many episodes of leadership removal that Cronin explores, she suggests that arresting leaders of terrorist organizations is the most plausible method of ensuring that terror groups do not respond in violence and potentially disperse. She posits that subjecting the leaders of terrorist organizations to ‘the rule of law, [emphasizing] the rule of law, [profiling] leaders as criminals, and [demonstrating] the


\textsuperscript{60} Hafez, Mohammed, and Joseph M. Hatfield. 2006. “Do Targeted Assassinations Work?”. p 361.


rule of law’ has proven most efficient in curtailing terrorist activity\textsuperscript{63}. However, she also adds that ‘repression’ is also a potential way in which to limit terrorist activity and end a specific terrorist group. She warns, however, that repressive counterterrorism and counterinsurgency tactics do not diminish popular support for a cause that may have been the root of terrorist activity, and only serves to eliminate a highly specific terrorist threat or group, not the greater problem of radicalization and willingness to employ terrorism\textsuperscript{64}.

One is forced to acknowledge the breadth and depth of Cronin’s research and while its limits are quite few, they are noticeable. Foremost, Cronin’s assessment of how leadership decapitation impacts terrorist organizations belies the truth of the practice. In focusing on the mitigating factors of why leadership decapitation is largely ineffective, her research does little to address the sobering reality of its regular implementation. Her research misses the fact that leadership decapitation is a path-dependent strategy already under employment in the United States and several other state actors. Secondly, Cronin’s various methods of leadership decapitation, e.g. arrest, targeted killing, repression, etc., fall short of realizing that often a singular counter-terrorism strategy or state apparatus can, at times, employ all or some of these methods. Rather, they are not always mutually exclusive of one another.

**Leadership Decapitation Factors**

Among the most prominent and probable factors mentioned by academics as to the overall effectiveness of leadership decapitation in bringing organizational death to a terrorist group are age, structure, and motivation. I reaffirm what has been argued by many scholars and researchers; that the aspects of relative age, structure type, and internal motivation likely determine whether and when a kingpin strategy would cause the cessation of terrorist activity or dissolve the group.

**Age of Terrorist Organizations**

While agreement among scholarship is hard to come by with regards to the efficacy of leadership decapitation, among its proponents, the age of terror groups appears to be a strong mitigating factor in determining its vulnerability to decapitation. Bryan Price argues that the

\textsuperscript{63} Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns. p. 17.

\textsuperscript{64} Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns. p. 36.
‘earlier leadership decapitation occurs in a terrorist group’s life cycle, the greater the effect it will have on the group’s mortality rate’ to which he adds that ‘the effects...diminish by half in the first ten years, and after approximately twenty years, leadership decapitation may have no effect on the group’s mortality rate’.

Price is not alone in the assertion that the two decade marker is pivotal for those who would implement a strategy of leadership decapitation. Surviving the initial years of turbulence as a terrorist organization can strengthen a group’s core of leadership, allow for the creation of a network of supply and communication lines, name viable successors in the event of leadership decapitation, build training camps, establish ties with regional communities for materiel and personnel support, and provide the valuable time necessary to consolidate resources in order to perform clandestine acts of terrorism.

**Structure of Terrorist Organizations**

Jenna Jordan states that ‘the susceptibility of organizations to decapitation...vary based on organizational type’. The operational success, or likely employment of leadership decapitation against a terrorist group should be determined by whether the organization is singularly dependent upon the skills and resources of that figure to survive. If a terrorist group is reliant upon its foremost leader because he or she brings explosives expertise or financial resources, for example, to the group, then their extrication will represent a ‘loss of human capital’. Still, if the leadership exemplifies a sense of religious adherence or is emblematic of a military success over a past enemy, their arrest or death will be a symbolic wound, but not an operationally fatal one. To this end, terrorist groups that are structured hierarchically with a singular or small core of leadership at its topmost rung – like those that arise from political institutions – are most vulnerable to a loss of leadership. Groups that operate more diffusely, with loosely oriented cells or ‘nodes’ and a less coterminous leadership hierarchy are less susceptible to leadership decapitation derailing future acts of terror because permission or funding from leadership is not a prerequisite for action.

---

Internal Motivation of Terrorist Groups

Terrorist groups whose foundations are predicated upon a fundamental, religious belief or set of beliefs, or whose actions arise from an ideological imperative have proven especially violent\textsuperscript{70}. In fact, some evidence suggests that the use of leadership decapitation against violent, religious extremists, can increase their level of violence\textsuperscript{71}. However, there is reason to believe that when leadership decapitation occurs within terrorist groups whose sole basis for violent activity is religious compulsion, those groups lose direction, morale, and subsequently the necessity to carry out acts of violence. On the other hand, when terrorist groups who employ terrorism to purely nationalistic ends or as a means of achieving sovereignty experience leadership decapitation, it does not irrevocably harm the greater organization because the cause remains the same. Rather, the death of a leader can be perceived as martyrdom to the cause of statehood and further galvanize the movement to acts of retaliation, viewing the leader’s removal as a form of brinksmanship and increased investment in the cause from which cessation would mean a loss of investment.

Case Studies

The case studies I have selected for examination vary in region, time period, target type, means of violence, period of operation, and type of group structuring. These differences are meant to separate the cases from biases of similarity. Still, the terrorist groups selected share some base similarities: they all have a structural framework that undergirds them, providing either a hierarchical or horizontal structuring, they all operate by a core motivation that binds its members and drives terrorist activity, and they all have known ages that lend themselves to the U.S. State Department’s designation of operational activity or inactivity for a period of two years. These shared factors, alongside the general variety of the case studies, I believe, provides for an even assessment by which to test the aforementioned variables of age, motivation, and structure on array of groups.

\textsuperscript{71} Mannes, Aaron. "Testing the Snake Head Strategy". p. 40-49.
The Peruvian, radical Marxist group, Sendero Luminoso, under Abimael Guzman performed acts of intimidation, kidnapping, and terrorism during the late 20th century, becoming known as the ‘Fourth Sword of Marxism’. However, following his arrest in 1992, the extremist group saw a political rebirth that stemmed its tide of violent, clandestine behavior. Although Sendero Luminoso did not dissolve as a result of Guzman’s arrest and trial, leadership decapitation undoubtedly had a hand in dissuading the organization from further acts of terrorism and violence.

The Communist Party of Peru, Sendero Luminoso, was the brainchild of Peruvian philosophy professor, Manuel Ruben Abimael Guzman Reynoso or Abimael Guzman. Although formed in 1960, Sendero Luminoso had largely been a University based, social project geared towards introducing a Marxist movement into Peru’s political sphere. It was not until the Peruvian government reintroduced democratic elections in 1980 that Sendero Luminoso, under the guidance of Guzman, became a militant insurgency that utilized executions and acts of terrorism to gain recognition. Capitalizing on the impoverished and the illiterate in Peru, Guzman consolidated authority through the summary execution of his detractors, both external and internal to Sendero Luminoso. Guzman’s grandiose vision for Peru included a ‘semipermanent, quasi-Maoist Cultural Revolution’ though many referred to him ironically as ‘President Gonzalo’ 72. Within the brief span of a decade of militant activity, Sendero Luminoso had become responsible for the burning of ballot boxes during election cycles, the attempted assassination of then-President of the Peruvian National Electoral Council, Domingo Garcia Rada, the kidnapping and killing of French aid workers and Italian missionaries, extortion and execution of tens of thousands of Peruvian citizens, and the establishment of an insurgency in Ayacucho, Huanca Sancos, and the Andean region several thousand members strong.

By 1990, the government of Peru had declared a state of emergency and armed a militia-like, counterinsurgency called the Comites de Auto Defensa or the Committee for Self Defense, consisting of approximately 7,000 Peruvian Rondas. Simultaneously, Peru’s National Intelligence Service and Army Intelligence Service had been dispatched to the Sendero Luminoso stronghold of Ayacucho to combat the insurgency, but in so doing, killed dozens of Peruvian citizens, including many children. These counterinsurgency raids resulted in the

72 Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends. p. 29.
arrests or deaths of key lieutenants in the Sendero Luminoso but had an inadvertent backlash effect, causing many Peruvian citizens to view Sendero Luminoso as the lesser of two evils.

The ineffectiveness of counterinsurgency efforts on the part of the Fujimori government can also be attributed to the highly particularized, membership structure of Sendero Luminoso. Regarding the intricacy of the organization’s internal structure, Audrey Cronin writes,

The leadership...remained highly personalized: new militants were required to write a letter of subjugation, in which they pledged their lives, not only to the cause, but to Guzman personally. Guzman’s role as the cultish, even deified intellectual leader was never in doubt. (How Terrorism Ends. Cronin, 2009)

Because Sendero Luminoso’s ‘organizational depth seemed impenetrable and impersonal’ (p. 19), it became apparent to Peruvian intelligence that the most damaging blow that could be dealt to the organization would be the extrication of its foremost leadership figure – Guzman himself.

On 12 September 1992, Peruvian military captured Guzman in Lima, along with members of the Sendero Luminoso leadership. Subsequent to his capture, the homicide statistics for Peru declined by half and in the following months, levels of violence continued to drop. During his trial, Guzman entered the courtroom in an outdated, striped prisoner’s uniform, and was held in a steel cage transported by police and military officers where he remained for the duration of his trial. The televised trial was conducted by a panel of judges and presided over by a military court that ultimately sentenced him to life in prison.

Age

Shining Path had not quite met the 20 year designation traditionally attributable to being resilient to leadership decapitation, hence we cannot rule out age as a factor in the organization’s period of inactivity. Considering Sendero Luminoso’s relative youth as an insurgency, it was unable to establish the necessary lines of supply, or consolidate and maintain the local support needed to survive annexation by the Peruvian government. Further, the group’s controlled territory simply grew too large, too fast within its later years of existence. Without

bolstering its infrastructure in order to survive a government incursion, Sendero Luminoso’s area of control became vulnerable first to the Comites de Auto Defensa, and later to the intervening Peruvian military.

As well, Sendero Luminoso's shortened longevity likely contributed to its inability to formulate surreptitious financial networks to better disseminate and launder illicit funds that could be hidden from the Peruvian government. Funds, along with personnel and popular support, are the foundation of successful insurgencies like the DAESH, and the FARC. When Abimael Guzman was arrested at a downtown apartment in Lima in 1992, he was found with a trove of computer disks that held membership records as well as most of the group’s financial information. This singular cache of information allowed Peruvian intelligence to undermine any future funding of acts of terror by Sendero Luminoso and further prosecute Guzman for acts of financial criminality.

Structure

Two years before Guzman’s arrest and incarceration, one of Shining Path’s political representatives remarked that ‘there is no number two. There is only Presidente Gonzalo and then the party,’ and with a sense of foreboding, adding that ‘without Presidente Gonzalo, we would have nothing’\textsuperscript{74}. Guzman’s unwillingness to groom or name a successor, left Sendero Luminoso particularly susceptible to leadership decapitation. Guzman’s top-down leadership, cult of personality, and unquestioned authority within Shining Path made it largely unnecessary to name a successor. In addition, Guzman was personally responsible for designating targets for assassination and orchestrating anti-government operations within the span of a decade that did not afford him the time necessary to name a successor, had he wanted to. Following Guzman, Oscar Ramirez Duran – or ‘Feliciano’ – attempted to pick up where Guzman had left off, but Sendero Luminoso’s reliance on ‘President Gonzalo’ was too strong to overcome the subsequent fracturing of the group and the temptation of government-offered amnesty\textsuperscript{75}. Duran was himself arrested in 1999 by Peruvian authorities.


Sendero Luminoso’s clearly structured chain of command, with Guzman at it top, made a ‘kingpin strategy’ particularly effective. Guzman had become so revered, even deified, that no other member of the group could provide the same ideological and charismatic influence to drive the group’s activities. Guzman’s hierarchical organization was so dependent upon him that at his request, they were willing to ‘lay down their arms’ and renounce acts of violence.

Motivation

Sendero Luminoso possessed well-defined, ideological objectives of establishing a Maoist style communist regime in Peru. However, the group became susceptible to leadership decapitation because it was singularly dependent upon Guzman for ideological directives and inspiration. The ideology of Sendero Luminoso was so inextricably linked with Guzman that the group philosophy of Peruvian communism that it became encapsulated in what was termed as ‘Gonzalo Thought’ – the extrapolation and often rote-memorized communist interpretations of Guzman. Indeed, Guzman was valued by the group to such a degree that when he went underground in 1989, and was not seen by many until his arrest three years later, the mystique and reverence for the unseen, ‘Presidente Guzman’ only widened.

Guzman’s charisma within his group was counterbalanced by waning, local support from the Peruvian lower classes. The Peruvian peasants of the Ayacucho highlands provided for an early warning system of sorts against the intrusion of Peruvian security forces. However, with the diminishing support of the peasantry, security raids became a more frequent. When Guzman was arrested in Lima in 1992, the group became essentially directionless. The central motivation did not remain pursuing a communist central government, but singularly obsessed with freeing Guzman. Leadership decapitation was further successful in the case of Sendero Luminoso because the ideological structure of the organization was bound with Guzman’s particularized rhetoric and interpretation of what communism could mean for the poor and disenfranchised of Peru.

---

Measuring Success & Effects

Although the life of Sendero Luminoso spanned nearly 50 years, its militant insurgency encompassed only a brief, twelve years. During that time however, an immense amount of property was destroyed and Guzman's organization was seen as culpable for approximately 30,000 Peruvians casualties in total (e.g. Terrorist acts, skirmishes with security and military, kidnappings, etc.) of whom 11,000 were civilians. The thirteen-year militancy of Sendero Luminoso ended largely with the leadership decapitation of Abimael Guzman, without whom the violent potency of the group could not survive. The briefness of the group’s terrorist activities cannot exclusively be attributed to its youth. Nonetheless, the short amount of time during which Sendero Luminoso conducted acts of terrorism in Peru, coupled with the intensity of those activities made the means necessary for its survival after Guzman’s arrest most likely too difficult for the group to successfully implement.

Figure 1.1. Number of Shining Path Incidents (1980 – 1992)

Figure 1.1 illustrates the number of incidents attributed to Shining Path from 1980, when the group’s militancy began, to 1992 when Guzman was arrested by Peruvian authorities. An additional two years are included subsequent to Guzman’s arrest to determine the operational operability of Shining Path.

---


In Figure 1.1, the data demonstrates that Shining Path attacks were on the downturn before Guzman’s arrest, beginning in 1991. This was likely due to Guzman himself going underground in the wake of government efforts to apprehend or assassinate him. In 1992, likely correlative with Guzman’s arrest, the number of incidents begins an even sharper decline in number. By 1993, Shining Path is carrying out only a fraction of the acts of terrorism that it was under Guzman’s leadership. Still, by 1998, Shining Path has either no incidents for which it took credit publicly, or the number is so small it has not registered in START’s data.

It should be noted that in 2002, Sendero Luminoso had a strong resurgence of activity, under a new, younger leadership. A series of embassy bombings, hostage-taking, and kidnappings, followed for nearly a decade, in spite of a diminishment in the group’s active members80. However, repeated government-led, leadership decapitation measures resulted in the killing or capturing of nearly all of Sendero Luminoso’s resurgent leaders. By 2013, Shining Path was declared ‘totally defeated’, by the Peruvian president and ‘unable to operate’81.

The resurgence of Shining Path has been attributed to a particularly militant faction of the group that refused amnesty after Duran’s arrest. However, it still appears that leadership decapitation remained a capable tool in dismantling Sendero Luminoso, given that all potential leadership members were captured or killed simultaneously82. Given the ideological motivation of the group, but its failure to conform to the political norms of Peru, as my theory for typological behavior suggests, the group failed to achieve its stated goal of a Marxist revolution in Peru and has, by most accounts, dissolved.

Al-Qa’ida – Usama bin Ladin

Al-Qa’ida’s loss of Usama bin Ladin illustrates the pitfalls of leadership decapitation in groups that are hierarchically structured, older, well-financed, bureaucratized, and maintain a clearly stated motivation that remains unchanged in the face of counter-terrorism measures. Al-Qa’ida survived in spite of its founder’s demise, I suggest, because by the time he was targeted the group had already reached an age benchmark and had prepared for such an eventuality.

Also displayed by the case of al-Qa’ida is the interplay of the revenge motive in targeting leadership. While targeting a terrorist leader successfully can be a propaganda tool for a state’s counter-terrorism apparatus, it can also proffer the impression that a state government is vengeful rather than pragmatic.

Al-Qa’ida, with Usama bin Ladin, Abdullah Azzam, and Ayman al-Zawahiri at its head is one of the oldest, operationally active terrorist organizations still in existence. Founded during the end of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, al-Qa’ida, or ‘the Foundation’ grew as part of a larger contingent of Sunni, Mujahideen combatting a Soviet-led coalition. Al-Qa’ida’s roots are far less innocuous than its more contemporary reputation might suggest. In response to the Soviet war in Afghanistan, Usama bin Ladin and Islamic scholar and Muslim Brotherhood member, Abdullah Azzam formed the Maktab al-Khidamat in 1984. The Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK) or ‘Services Office’ was founded in Peshawar province as a means for consolidating financial resources and directing Mujahideen recruits to the Afghanistan conflict. By 1988, al-Qa’ida became functional alongside the MAK until the end of the Soviet war in Afghanistan in 1989. In that same year, Azzam was assassinated by an unknown entity and the mujahid under his command had come under the auspices of al-Qa’ida.

As Usama bin Ladin moved from state to state – exiled by Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Yemen, and the Sudan – his organization expanded operational nodes from where he fled. Michael Horowitz, in *The Diffusion of Military Power*, notes that ‘the connection between Al Qaeda and Hezbollah became one of these crucial nodes, particularly in the spread of suicide terrorism around the world’ and is indicative of al-Qa’ida’s propensity to adapt through proliferation of these ‘nodes’. During the 1990s, the Taliban offered protection and safe haven for al-Qa’ida and bin Ladin in return for military training and materiel support.

It was at this time that the CIA, received intelligence that al-Qa’ida was determined to attack what it perceived one of the ‘far enemy’, the United States. The Central Intelligence Agency, Counter-Terrorism Center report – though heavily redacted – read:

Reporting suggests Bin Ladin and his allies are preparing for attacks in the US, including an aircraft hijacking to obtain the release of Shaykh Umar Abd

---

Sources indicate the Bin Ladin organization or its allies are moving closer to implementing anti-US attacks at unspecified locations\textsuperscript{84}.

This fear was later realised with the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, the suicide attack on the U.S.S. Cole in the Yemeni Gulf in 2000, and the subsequent attacks of September 2001.

The respective invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 led to an extended armed conflict that forced Usama bin Ladin and his organizational leadership into hiding. The protracted bombing of Tora Bora in late 2001 pushed the al-Qa'ida 'emir' to further disappear into the Federated Tribal Areas of Pakistan, where he remained for ten years. Likely from late 2005 until 2011, bin Ladin was residing in a modest compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Utilising intelligence garnered from bin Ladin's network of couriers, the CIA and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) had extensively formulated a raid on the Pakistani safe-house, codenamed 'Operation Neptune Spearhead'. On May 1st, bin Ladin was killed during the ensuing firefight, along with three members of his cadre and a female hostage. Bin Ladin's corpse was expeditiously buried at sea, but not before his identity was confirmed by DNA ferisis.

\textbf{Age}

The longer, operational life-span of al-Qa'ida allowed it to draw on operatives where necessary – as evidenced by the diversity of membership participation in the 9/11 attacks, with some operatives coming from Munich and the United States, while others were Pakistani and Egyptian nationals. To this end, Stephen Holmes writes that '[Al-Qa'ida's] basic rationality can be inferred from their decision to mobilize fast-moving light forces acting in secrecy. This is a highly efficient way to deploy the modest resources at their disposal\textsuperscript{85}. Longevity of age afforded al-Qa'ida the ability to train individuals in Afghanistan and Yemen while inserting others into western societies. Further, because of al-Qa'ida's thirty-one years in operation, it was able to survive the death of its leadership, best represented by Usama bin Ladin. With networks of intelligence, suppliers, supporters, recruiters and operatives in place for decades before his


demise, the death of bin Ladin had only a modest effect on al-Qa’ida’s ability to carry out acts of terrorism. This would suggest that al-Qa’ida’s age and the abilities amassed through its three-decade-long existence, factored into the ineffectiveness of leadership decapitation in precipitating organizational death.

Structure

Al-Qa’ida has the hallmarks of a hierarchically structured, terrorist organization. While many aspects of the group remain autonomous – such as the perpetration of acts of terrorism like those seen in London in 2007 – there are definitive branches of al-Qa’ida as well as a ranking of leadership which takes precedence. Usama bin Ladin was recognized as emir of al-Qa’ida until his death in 2011, when, after an interim emir, Zawahiri assumed command leadership.

According to the theory put forth in my introduction, hierarchically structured, terrorist groups should be more susceptible to a kingpin strategy. Why then did Usama bin Ladin’s death not result in the degradation or dissolution of al-Qa’ida? I believe bureaucratization to be the likely culprit. In other words, the age of al-Qa’ida, and the advantages afforded to it because of its advanced age, eclipsed the structural orientation factor. Al-Qa’ida’s bureaucratized structure manifested itself in numerous ways, from the establishment of different, operational branches responsible for activities ranging from media and propaganda and financing to training operatives, and a madrasa council that presided over issues regarding the interpretation and application of Shari’a. Most importantly, bureaucratization, as it concerns al-Qa’ida, allowed the group to formulate contingencies for leadership turnover in the event of leadership decapitation. Thus, in this case, the factors of age and structural bureaucratization worked in the favor of al-Qa’ida to reinforce organizational resilience.

Motivation

Al-Qa’ida has, from its inception, espoused a fundamentalist, conservative, anti-revisionist theology of Sunni, Islam referred to as Salafism or Wahhabism, referring literally to the ‘ancient ones’ or the original companions of Mohammed. Still, one can attribute the entirety of al-Qa’ida’s ideological impetus to Salafism, independent of the social and political changes.

---

undergirding Islam in the late 1970s. Al-Qa’ida is, instead, can better be understood as motivated by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, particularly those in his seminal treatise, entitled *Milestones*. Qutb’s writings, especially those in *Milestones*, had such a pronounced effect on bin Laden’s thoughts towards non-Muslims and western culture, that his rhetoric often mirrored that of Qutb’s. The self-righteousness often espoused by bin Ladin and Zawahiri, can be traced to a passage from the Prologue of Qutb’s *Milestones*:

> In the world there is only one party of God; all others are parties of Satan and rebellion...There is only one way to reach God; all other ways do not lead to Him. For human life, there is only one true system, and that is Islam; all other systems are *Jahiliyyah*. There is only one law which ought to be followed, and that is the Shari’ah from God; anything else is mere emotionalism and impulsiveness...The truth is one and indivisible; anything different from it is error.

Although a majority of contemporary Muslims, particularly those in western countries, would disagree with Qutb and bin Ladin’s interpretation of Islamic theology, bin Ladin, Zawahiri, and Azzam made use of a religious foundation – pardon the pun – of Islamic hermeneutics in order to promulgate an extremist and militant cult. Al-Qa’ida’s Wahhabist underpinnings are compounded by the fact that many of the countries where they took root or who provided material or financial support to the organization were themselves governed by fundamentalist factions of Islam.

Why then, if al-Qa’ida is motivated by an aggregation of ideology and religion, did it not suffer organizational dissolution or death when it experienced leadership decapitation in 2011? The answer likely has to do with a third factor – the state-building aspirations inherent in the ideology of al-Qa’ida. Usama bin Ladin’s expressed goal, delivered repeatedly in addresses, but most thoroughly in his ‘Letter to the West’ in which he remarks that the fundamental objective of his organization is to remove all takfir, secular, and western-influences from what the group considers traditionally Muslim lands, and establish a new caliphate. Thus the conflation of theocratic, state-building (i.e. Separatism/Nationalism), and religion and ideology strengthen al-

---

87 Referring to the state of moral and spiritual ignorance either before the arrival and revelations of Mohammed, or the state before acceptance of those revelations.


Qa’ida against leadership decapitation. Al-Qa’ida is bolstered by a desire shared by a considerable enough majority to ensure that the arrest or death of leadership will not curtail the ultimate desire of seeing the stated objective actualized.

Measuring Success & Effects

Figure 1.2 illustrates the terrorist operations carried out by all factions of al-Qa’ida, beginning after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and ending exactly two years after the death of Usama bin Ladin. Rather than al-Qa’ida’s operational capacity contracting, the evidence, as provided by the matrix, suggests that this instance of leadership decapitation had an adverse counter-terrorism effect, with the number of relatable incidents rising to approximately 500 a year after bin Ladin’s death. At the time of his death in 2011, there were approximately 145 terrorist incidents attributed to al-Qa’ida, worldwide. This figure represents a near 245% increase in the number of al-Qa’ida-related attacks carried out globally in the short expanse of a year. Controlling for other factors, the figure above suggests that

Figure 1.2. al-Qa’ida Incidents (7 Oct. 2001 – 31 Oct. 2013)

In the case of al-Qa’ida and Usama bin Ladin, repeated expulsions and self-imposed exiles worked to the benefit of the organization. Unlike Sendero Luminoso’s overt operations and insertion into mainstream, Peruvian politics, al-Qa’ida operated clandestinely. Moving from state

---

to state, bin Ladin established a network of contacts, supporters, and personnel who prioritized ‘listening ability, good manners, obedience, and making a bay’at pledge or to follow one’s superiors’, especially to bin Ladin himself. Once the bay’at had been made, membership became loosely based and largely autonomous, leaving only a tentative relationship with al-Qa’ida the organization.

This oath permitted al-Qa’ida to persist from the United Kingdom to the Philippine islands, carrying out covert attacks on targets. Further, al-Qa’ida's extensive web of nodes exhibited itself through its presence in over a forty-five nations, particularly in the case of its early ties to Hezbollah. On this, Michael Horowitz writes that ‘Bin Laden sent Al Qaeda operatives to Hezbollah specifically for the purpose of learning how to execute [a suicide] attack like the U.S. Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon’. Al-Qa’ida's established connection with Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations around the world were only instituted because of al-Qa’ida's advanced, organizational age.

**Abu Sayyaf – Abdurajak & Khadaffy Janjalani**

The case study of the Abu Sayyaf Group represents the complexity of the interplay between institutional dissolution and ‘reorienting’. Reorienting assures survival but undermines the stated goals of the group, leading to a loss of local or political support. ASG demonstrated that it placed a higher premium on acquiring treasure than pursuing the goal of a separate, Islamic territory within the Philippines. Thus, repeated episodes of leadership decapitation had mixed success in bringing about organizational death for ASG.

The group Abu Sayyaf or ‘Bearer of the Sword’ began as an offshoot of the significantly larger Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). In 1991, The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) or more simply, Abu Sayyaf, was established by former MNLF council member, Abdurajik Abubakar Janjalani who envisioned a more proactive, military solution to the establishment of an independent, Islamic state within the Philippines. Janjalani was a mujahadeen veteran of the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan in the 1980s, a fact which made him a particularly charismatic...

---

leadership figure among his followers in Abu Sayyaf. Janjalani mounted Abu Sayyaf’s first major terrorist operation in 1995; an assault on the upscale town of Ipil on the island of Mindanao. The raid involved a jailbreak operation in which Abu Sayyaf freed several prisoners from the Philippine National Police headquarters, including Janjalani’s younger brother, Khadaffy Janjalani.

In December of 1998, Abdurajak Janjalani was killed in a skirmish with Philippine security forces on Basilan Island. Following the death of his brother, Khadaffy Janjalani assumed leadership of Abu Sayyaf but noticeably without the nationalistic and ideological underpinnings of his late sibling. Under the younger Janjalani, Abu Sayyaf split into several splinter groups that retained some loose central ties, but for the most part, sought to antagonize the Philippine military and police apparatuses and to extort money from wealthy citizens and tourists alike. As Audrey Cronin writes, Abu Sayyaf ‘became essentially a criminal organization,’ and ultimately caused the group to ‘[subsume] its political agenda to criminal greed.’ Greed did not preclude Abu Sayyaf from continuing to target civilians in acts of terrorism for political ends. The group’s attempted bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Manila was seen by security officials as attempt to remove foreign, non-Muslim influence and to gain the recognition of al-Qa’ida, with whom Abu Sayyaf already had a tentative alliance. Increased terrorist activity by Abu Sayyaf came with it a greater degree of attention from Filipino security forces. Khadaffy Janjalani was himself killed in a police raid on an Abu Sayyaf stronghold in 2006.

Age

Abu Sayyaf, at the time of Abdurajak Janjalani’s death was a meager seven years old. By the time his brother, Khadaffy, was also eliminated the group was slightly older, but still not near enough the twenty-year marker for organizational resilience spoken of by many in scholarship. As a young group, Abu Sayyaf should have likely experienced organizational degradation or death. While the group itself did not collapse outright, it did degrade noticeably in its terrorist activity after 1998 when Abdurajak Janjalani was killed. The group fractured into three smaller factions, each of which no longer reported operations to Khadaffy nor sought his

---

96 Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends. p. 27.
97 Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends. p. 28.
support. Further, the group’s political and religious goals were undermined by its subsequent operations which only served to monetarily further the group.

The practice of ‘reorienting’ as Audrey Cronin refers to it, is critical in explaining why Abu Sayyaf retracted in the wake of two episodes of decapitation without implosion. Like many terrorist groups that experience leadership decapitation, Abu Sayyaf chose to suppress unrealistic political ambitions for more practical ones. In this regard, the youth of Abu Sayyaf had a hand in subverting political and religious agendas but did not cause an outright organizational collapse. A measure of success is therefore clouded by Abu Sayyaf’s transition to what is essentially a criminal organization and insurgency under the auspices of DAESH. While Abu Sayyaf has very rarely committed recent acts of terrorism compared to its early days under Abdurajak Janjalani, it is still engaged in kidnapping, extortion, racketeering, smuggling, and the regional drug trade. By this measure it has not been operationally inactive for the designated period of two years to declare it dissolved or dormant. Even more confounding is Abu Sayyaf’s continued employment of Islamist Jihadist rhetoric, juxtaposed by actions that are antithetical or uncommon for similar extremist groups.

Structure

Abu Sayyaf’s command structure is not well known to counter-terrorism specialists in the region, but it is assumed to be paramilitary. It is clear that Abdurajak Janjalani had a powerful command influence over his group, which is unsurprising given that he is accredited with its formation. Similarly it was his familiarity with Islam and Islamic scholarship which gave him standing and authority in the organization. However, the same could not be said of his younger brother, Khadaffy. Again, as with age, it is difficult to discern to what extent the death of both Janjalanis had a deleterious effect on Abu Sayyaf, as the organization did not imminently dissolve, but reoriented.

The leader-apparent, Isnilon Hapilon, is not well known by counterterrorism leaders except that he is a longtime member of the group. Abu Sayyaf can and should be understood as hierarchically structured, however, because there are no parallel levels of authority with that of the topmost commander. This would serve to explain why the religious underpinnings of Abu Sayyaf were restrained when Abdurajak Janjalani was killed, due to being viewed as a military and religious figure. No apparent diminishment or reorienting occurred after Khadaffy’s death.
however, because his authority was neither consolidated nor understood in terms of the group’s military, political, or religious motives. Leadership decapitation had a marginally deleterious impact for Abu Sayyaf the first time it was experienced, however, because Khadaffy had not cemented or consolidated power among the several factions of the group, his death had little effect on halting the group.

Motivation

Abu Sayyaf’s motivation began as political and religious in nature, seeking to establish an exclusively Salafist, Muslim province in the Philippine islands. This, however, was the stated goal of the group in 1991. As of 2014, the group’s manifesto has remained largely unchanged with the notable exception of an amendment to ‘obey [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] on anything which our hearts desire...and to value him more than anyone else. We will not take any emir leader other than him unless we see in him any obvious act of disbelief that could be questioned by Allah in the hereafter’98. Still, the evidence gathered through action would suggest that Abu Sayyaf is more profoundly motivated by financially furthering the group than by actually changing the political system of the Philippines into an Islamic theocracy. Ergo, it remains difficult to pinpoint the core motivation of Abu Sayyaf, sufficed to say that it has tenuous links to its Islamist inception.

Abu Sayyaf’s religious and political motives likely meant that leadership decapitation had a degrading, but not fatal impact on the organization. When Khadaffy Janjalani was killed in 2006, the motivation of the group was decentralized and varied from faction to faction.

Measuring Success & Effects

Figure 1.3.1 Number of ASG Incidents (1991 – 2000)\(^{99}\)

\[\text{years in operation}\]

Figure 1.3.1 demonstrates the number of terrorist incidents perpetrated by Abu Sayyaf between 1991, when Abdurajak Janjalani formed the breakaway group, and 1998 when he was assassinated by Filippino security forces. Included is an additional two years for observation of ASG’s level of operational operability. The purpose of doing so, as stated in my introduction, is to surmise whether a level of operability is maintained for a period of two years after leadership decapitation, the two years being the determinant extent of time deemed by the State Department for a terrorist group to be regarded as inoperable.

When Abdurajak was killed by Philippine security forces in 1998, the number of ASG incidents was already trending upwards, according to the data from START. At the time of Abdurajak Janjalani’s death, there were approximately 8 terrorist incidents linked to the ASG. After the subsequent two years (i.e. the year 2000) the measure of time for determining operability, the ASG was responsible for twice as many incidents per year as prior to Abdurajak’s death. This information would suggest that rather slowing or halting ASG’s incident rate, in this case, leadership decapitation had little impact on the group’s ability to carry out attacks. One could attribute this steady increase of incidents to the timely leadership turnover that occurred within the group, with Khadaffy immediately succeeding his late brother as leader.

---

Figure 1.3.2 illustrates the number of incidents perpetrated by Abu Sayyaf between 1998, when Khadaffy Janjalani assumed leadership from his deceased brother, and 2006, when Khadaffy Janjalani himself was killed by Philippine security forces. Included is an additional two years to test the group’s operational operability, post-leadership decapitation.

As in Figure 1.3.1, the initial data of Figure 1.3.2 highlights the increase in the number of attributable terrorist incidents at the time of Abdurajak’s death in 1998. In spite of several fluctuations in the number of incidents perpetrated by the group between 1998 and 2006 when Khadaffy was killed, the group certainly was operational. Many of the dips and fluctuations in the group’s level of attacks carried out, are likely due to the splintering of the group into three factions, while Khadaffy remained the leader of Abu Sayyaf. However, at the time of Khadaffy’s death in 2006, the number of incidents appears to have plateaued. That being said, the group remained operational, and within the span of a year, its attack capability soared to over 20 incidents a year, far from being rendered operationally inert.

Leadership decapitation, both times it was experienced by Abu Sayyaf, caused a systemic shift in the actions of the group. First, under Abdurajak Janjalani, Abu Sayyaf had expressed the desire to see the emergence of an independent Islamic province within the Philippines. However, following his death, the group separated into three factions, who at times used Islamic separatist rhetoric, but whose actions suggested that opportunism and avarice

---

were more potent catalysts for terrorist action than political or religious ideology. When, again, Abu Sayyaf suffered from leadership decapitation with the death of Khadaffy Janjalani in 2006, the group experienced another pivot in its focus. As of 2014, Abu Sayyaf, under the apparent leadership of a senior commander named Isnilon Hapilon, swore a *bay’at* or allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and DAESH.

The interest in collaborating with or allying itself with DAESH reflects another potential change in the interests of Abu Sayyaf. The group had previously sought support from al-Qa’ida in 2002 from fear that the resurgence of U.S. military in the Philippines was signally a return of permanent military instalments which had not existed in the region since 1992. In 2014, Abu Sayyaf faces new targeting measures by Philippine security forces, in the form of counter-insurgency. As it did in 2002, Abu Sayyaf looks to ally itself with the most powerful (terrorist) actor who is in a position to provide support nominally or in the form of solidarity, rather than materially. The *bay’at* sworn to al-Baghdadi, should be viewed in a similar way; not as a literal alliance with mutual exchange of information, practices, and funds, but to inspire fear and pause in the counterterrorism system that hunts them and to opportunistically enhance their own regional clout. There is scant evidence that any intelligence, money, or logistical methods have been either disseminated from DAESH to Abu Sayyaf or shared between the two. Monetary, self-interest prevailed – and continues to prevail – over the activities of the group. As such, the group will continue to be able to attract young, disenfranchised, and disaffected Filipinos, for whom poverty and the under-representation of Muslims in the Philippines is a call to terrorism and crime.

**The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – Velupillai Prabhakaran & Tamil Leadership**

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam provide a case study for the susceptibility of large terrorist organizations to leadership decapitation. Further, the case of the LTTE demonstrates the significance of repressive counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency measures in their ability to demolish a terrorist organization, regardless of other prevailing factors, such as popular support, size, and funding. Most notably, the execution of any and all likely successors to LTTE leadership prevented as resurgence of the group, in spite of levels of local support.

---

Formed in 1976 from a social project by university students, The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a sprawling, diasporic terrorist insurgency that occupied large portions of Sri Lankan territory for nearly thirty years. With one of the largest memberships of any such organization – at its zenith, approximately 18,000 members\(^\text{102}\) – the LTTE received steady popular support from ethnic Tamils who, through a number of state-run programs, felt increasingly socially and politically underrepresented. The charismatic Velupillai Prabhakaran formed the LTTE at the age of eighteen, originally keeping the group’s numbers small while maintaining a high standard of military-style training for his members. Prabhakaran established a formidable stronghold in the Wanni region of Sri Lanka off the Indian coast. Prabhakaran also managed to institute an extensive network of checkpoints and informants to keep track of any outsiders who entered the group’s territorial control.

The LTTE grew to prominence and to the attention of terrorism experts when in 1983, the group staged an assault on a convoy of Sri Lankan military personnel, killing a dozen soldiers. Largely in response to this attack, Sinhalese rioters across the country staged brutal riots in which Tamils were beaten, raped, and murdered by the hundreds in an episode that became known as Black July\(^\text{103}\). The aftermath of these riots and the government intervention instituted to quell them began the Sri Lankan Civil War. After the failed intercession of the Indian army in order to curtail the internecine violence, a 2001 peace process was also unsuccessful in bringing about a lasting resolution to the conflict. When the LTTE consistently violated the ceasefire ordinance, the Sri Lankan army launched a major military incursion into Jaffna province in 2006 to dismantle and defeat the Tamil Tigers. In 2009, Prabhakaran and a majority of the LTTE leadership and militants were killed during a weeks-long firefight with the military\(^\text{104}\).

**Age**

Almost exceeding the twenty-year marker for organizational resilience, the LTTE should have built up adequate defence against the systemic leadership decapitation it experienced in 2001 and 2009. The LTTE’s longevity had afforded it the advantages of territorial entrenchment.

\(^{102}\) "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)." South Asia Terrorism Portal. Institute for Conflict Management, 2010. Web.


of nearly 5,800 square miles at its strongest\textsuperscript{105}, a strong command structure, familiarity and regional support from Tamil civilians, powerful armaments and defence, and the prestige of having survived multiple incursions and a civil war with the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE was also able to effectively consolidate resources and external support from international actors to support its operations for many years. Similarly, part of the reason the LTTE survived as long as it had was perhaps due to its strategic usage of its political branch to generate ceasefires and peace talks during which time it would plan and stage assaults as well as acts of terrorism.

Given the LTTE’s significant advancement in age, why was it not able to withstand leadership decapitation? The LTTE had survived the loss of three major, organizational leaders in less than a decade; first, Vaithilingam Sornalingam (alias, Colonel Shankar) in 2001, S. P. Tamilselvan in 2007, and ultimately the founder and longtime leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, in 2009. The advanced age of the LTTE could not shield it from the all out repressive incursion instituted by the SASF in 2007 and more thoroughly in 2009 when the group was routed and thereafter declared operationally inactive. As Audrey Cronin writes, ‘Indiscriminate, retaliatory police or military force used in a frontal assault, at home or abroad, may set back a movement. Overwhelming – and unscrupulous – use of force may even obliterate groups using terror tactics’\textsuperscript{106}. The LTTE’s age came with it a degree of bureaucratisation, as suggested by some in scholarship (footnote). However, the age and bureaucratized structure of the group, did not allow for an easy leadership transition as Jenna Jordan suggested. This may be partly due to these separation of different branches of operation within the LTTE, or possibly the wholesale execution of all likely successors. Still, the fact that no attempt was made to name a successive leader indicates that age does not always carry with it a thorough formulation of bureaucratization.

Further, repressive counter-insurgency measures were successful in the case of the LTTE because of the marrying of several factors unique to this case study. First, the isolated, island nature of the area occupied by the LTTE meant that when the Sri Lankan military unseated them, it was relatively easy to both prevent wanted LTTE members from leaving the area, as well as new recruits from entering. Second, all attempts to reconstitute the group had been quelled by an aggressive military posture which reacted to the breakdown of prior peace-talks with the LTTE. Third, the authoritarian system of government in place in Sri Lanka issued

\textsuperscript{105} Richards, Joanne. "An Institutional History of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)." p 14.
\textsuperscript{106} Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends. p 141.
the military a carte blanche in its directive to dismantle the group, in ways that would have likely impeded the militaries of democratic states. Fourth, there was a strong, international, political incentive to represent the Tamil population in Sri Lanka for almost thirty years, especially among Swedish parliament. This meant that there was a viable opportunity for Tamil civil rights to become a reality without incorporating violence into the cause. Lastly, the wholesale execution of LTTE leaders, secondary and tertiary leadership, potential leaders, and in some cases, their sons or daughters for fear that they will seek revenge, coupled with the offer of amnesty to former Tamil Tiger members, meant that the group had little opportunity to consolidate what remained of itself.

Structure

As its original founder, Prabhakaran was the undisputed head of the LTTE and structured the organization – when it was the New Tigers and combined with the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) – in a hierarchical system. Although Prabhakaran was indicted by Interpol on several counts of terrorism, homicide, rape, conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism, assassinating a public figure, and organized crime¹⁰⁷ he was also well revered domestically by native Tamils and those Indians sympathetic to the Tamil cause who saw him as a liberation figure. Prabhakaran was personally responsible for orchestrating, instrumenting, supplying, and sometimes participating in acts of terrorism, primarily aimed at SASF and the Indian military. As such, Prabhakaran was both operationally and ideologically imperative to the functionality of the LTTE.

Prabhakaran often softened his local image by attending memorial services for Black Tiger members – the elite suicide unit of the LTTE – and was seen consoled widows and parents¹⁰⁸. This familiar and paternal image, allowed Prabhakaran to turn a blind eye to the more unscrupulous and savage behavior of his cohort. Thus, Prabhakaran could permit acts of terrorism and worse by his members, while projecting the image of an ideologically sensitive leader. Because of this dynamic, Prabhakaran remained largely unchallenged by any rivals to his authority, which in turn, made him a prime target for a kingpin strategy. In turn, Prabhakaran’s singular importance to the LTTE would justify the effectiveness of leadership decapitation in curtailing the activities of the LTTE. Still, Prabhakaran made no discernible effort

to name or groom a replacement, in the event of leadership decapitation resulting in his removal or death. This, in combination with the fact that most potential candidates for his replacement were also killed in the three yearlong raid on LTTE strongholds, meant that there was little chance of a succession of leadership and even less chance that the organization would long endure.

Motivation

The LTTE’s internal motivation from the outset has been to urge ‘The Tamil Nation in general and the Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully in the sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam is reached’109. Thus, the LTTE can safely be designated as being motivated by a nationalist-separatist agenda. According to the theory, the group should not have experienced organizational death in the wake of leadership decapitation because the underlying impetus for employing terrorism was larger than the group itself, namely, equitable treatment and recognition of Sri Lankan Tamils realized through independence. In spite of the repressive measures ultimately used to defeat the LTTE, Audrey Cronin writes:

The strategic dynamic is not between states and “nonstate actors”...The core of the relationship is between states and communities that are competing over the capacity to mobilize support, and it is success or failure in that dimension which ultimately determines whether or not repression ends terrorism.110

Given Cronin’s assessment, it becomes clear as why the LTTE itself was thoroughly destroyed, but the urgency for the state-assured rights of Tamils is still heavily in the public and political sectors. Public support remains high for Tamil issues remains high, however, the consolidating focus of the LTTE no longer exists to channel that ethnic self-interest into acts of violence or intense, political action. In the case of the LTTE, the national-separatist motivation of the group accounts for its strong membership, local support, and ability to mount assaults. However, these factors were undercut by the intense, repressive intervention of the Sri Lankan military.

110 Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends. p 145.
Measuring Success & Effects

The LTTE did not suffer a slow, grinding demise like those experienced by many terrorist organizations in decline. Many terrorist groups have suffered repeated and successive leadership decapitation without experiencing organizational death, like Volya, al-Qa’ida, and the Caucasus Emirate, for example. So, why did the LTTE collapse so thoroughly?

The repressive measures utilized by the Sri Lankan government in the final assault operation on the LTTE stronghold between 2006 and 2009 led to the swift degradation of the group. Cronin has consistently noted that repressive measures are usually capable of ending a terrorist organization. However, Cronin recommends that government and militaries avoid such measures given the propensity for them to have unforeseeable, secondary effects that can harm the effort to undermine the group’s ideology. It is clear that repression worked in the case of the LTTE, as it is one of the truly, organizationally dead groups examined in this paper.

Figure 1.4 LTTE Incidents from 1983 – 2009

Figure 1.4 exhibits the number of incidents perpetrated by the LTTE between 1983 when the group first militarized, and 2009 when Prabhakaran and most of his leadership was killed in a firefight with the Sri Lankan government.

Figure 1.4 highlights the impressive capability of repression as a counter-terrorism tool. Although the number of incidents committed by the LTTE was already appearing to trend downwards by 2006, when the Sri Lankan government began a campaign to eradicate the LTTE and its senior leadership in 2009, the number of incidents takes a noticeably sharper downturn. By 2010, there are few to no incidents attributable to the LTTE. The total removal of all, viable leadership replacements, as well as the arrest or execution of low-level LTTE operatives meant that there was no one in a position to coordinate or carry out acts of terrorism, a fact demonstrated by the data in Figure 1.4.

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – Abdullah Ocalan

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party or Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan’s (PKK) leader, Abdullah Ocalan, formed the group while studying Political Science at university in Ankara, Turkey in 1974. The PKK provides a reasonable case for the vulnerability of hierarchically structured, ideologically motivated terrorist groups to decapitation strikes. The import of these factors made it possible for Turkish, government forces to effectively dismantle the PKK subsequent to Ocalan’s arrest.

The PKK under Ocalan maintained the vision of inciting a ‘bottom-up’ revolution not dissimilar to that of Sendero Luminoso. During the PKK’s so-called ‘First Phase’, Ocalan hoped to oppose what he perceived as a domineering, Turkish state and in so doing, establish a sovereign, Kurdish state encompassing various regions of Turkey and Iraq112. The PKK arose as communist-socialist institution, whose structure strongly resembled that of a more traditional, political party. Internally, the PKK was governed by a General Secretary as well as a Party Assembly which served to legitimize the organization and win popular favor among Kurds. Ocalan’s popularity within the PKK, Turkey and among European Kurds grew throughout the late 1970s, earning him the nickname of ‘Apo’ or uncle. Ocalan’s extensive base of support garnered substantial financial and political support for the PKK, which Ocalan utilized to fund assaults, intimidations and assassinations of individuals, – both non-Kurds and Kurds – invite violent

demonstrations, and acts of sabotage, aimed at undermining the authority of the Turkish government.

The violent unrest in Turkey culminated in the 1980 military coup that ousted the provisional, civilian government, instituted martial law within Turkish borders, outlawed political parties and trade unions, abolished the Turkish Parliament, and suspended the constitution. By the time of the military coup d’etat, Ocalan had already left Turkey and was residing in Syria. Ocalan remained abroad, managing the activities of the PKK in absentia, first from Syria, then Lebanon, Russia, Italy, and Greece. 1984 saw the birth of the ‘Second Phase’ of PKK operations in Turkey, with a markedly more bloody agenda. The PKK's renewed campaign for a Kurdish state cost the lives of approximately 35,000 people over the course of fifteen years. Audrey Cronin notes that the PKK began 'attacking rural areas', intimidating, torturing, and often executing detractors while fomenting a popular coaliation among supporters and eventually targeting urban areas in traditional, Maoist fashion.

Ocalan was apprehended in Kenya in 1999 while being transported from the Greek embassy to the Nairobi international airport. Members of the Turkish, National Intelligence Organization or MIT, under information from the Central Intelligence Agency, carried out an operation that captured the political dissident and abruptly placed him on an unregistered flight out of the country\textsuperscript{113}. Ocalan's subsequent trial was extraordinarily protracted and ended with the judge rendering a death sentence which was later commuted to life when Turkey abolished the death penalty in 2002. The public outpouring of disdain at the sentence manifested in the form of protracted, violent protests among Kurds in London, Berlin, and Israel. In response the demonstrations, Ocalan encouraged his proponents to abstain from acts of violence – especially in his namesake – and the PKK's campaign of violence and terrorism sharply declined before halting altogether by 2002.

\textit{Age}

At the time of Ocalan’s apprehension in 1999, the PKK was less than one year shy of its twentieth anniversary. For the purposes of this assessment, I will treat the PKK as a terrorist group that has achieved the twenty-year marker given that several months of existence under

Ocalan’s governance would likely not have made an appreciable difference in the group’s level of organizational resilience. If the PKK achieved the age marker for resilience, why did it collapse after the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan? I contend that the nature of the PKK leadership, particularly the singular authority of Ocalan, was a more prominent factor in the operational functionality of the PKK than advantages likely afforded by age. Not unlike Shining Path’s leadership structure under Abimael Guzman, Ocalan’s sole command of the PKK, did not allow for the normal practices inherent in bureaucratization to take place, such as the appointment of a replacement. That is to say, the normal organizational strengths afforded by age were undermined because of Ocalan’s reluctance to delegate authority. This proved a stronger factor in defining the parameters of the PKK than bureaucratization, and accounts for the organizational degradation of the PKK after Ocalan’s arrest.

Structure

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party was particularly vulnerable to leadership decapitation because of its hierarchical structure. Because of its aspirations for political legitimacy as an active party within the greater Turkish Parliament, the organization structured itself like any other politically affiliated party. However, because their activities were more in line with an insurgency or terrorist organization, the PKK was ill-suited to survive a decapitation strike. While Ocalan’s removal did not create a leadership vacuum that more traditional, hierarchically structured, terrorist groups are likely to suffer from – because of the group’s bureaucratized, political party structure – he was the primary form for which violence was rationalized in furtherance of the cause of Kurdish autonomy, thus making his removal more potent in ending the PKK’s use of violence.

In 2003, the PKK regrouped and rebranded itself under a new name, the Kongra-Gel or KGK, and made a vow of only engaging in political activism on behalf of Kurds. Subsequent to his arrest and trial, acts of violence and terrorism attributed to the PKK declined sharply, due in part to a five-year, ceasefire agreement between the Turkish government and the PKK/KGK.

Ocalan, referred to as ‘Apo’ or uncle, in the style of Maoist, people’s revolutions, headed the Kurdistan Workers’ Party from its inception and sanctioned some of its most bloody atrocities. The singular authority that Ocalan represented for the PKK – metonymic of both the ethnic struggle of Kurds as well as its long struggle for legitimacy – made his removal especially
devastating for the PKK’s capacity to carry out acts of violence. In the case of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, leadership decapitation severely undermined the efficacy of the group by ‘[emphasizing] the rule of law, [profiling] leaders as criminals, and [demonstrating] the rule of law’ 114.

*Motivation*

For the PKK, its bottom-up vision for Turkish society as well as its political aspirations were both its greatest source of viability, and its most profound weakness. The regional support from Kurds in aid of the PKK came from their underrepresentation by the Turkish government and Turkish civil society. Ocalan’s vision of a Marxist system was the driving ideological foundation for the PKK, and justified its use of terrorism, extortion, kidnapping, and assassination. I label the PKK an ideological organization, more than any other factor, given that it’s primary goal was the establishment of a Communist political system in Turkey for the representation of ethnic Kurds, while only later did the notion of an independent Kurdistan. To this end, the purpose of the PKK’s desire to establish an independent Kurdistan was, in fact, to implement a Marxist system of governance over the newly established region. Given this, and that the impetus for the creation of the PKK was Marxist communism, I discern the prevailing motivation as ideological.

*Measuring Success & Effects*

Figure 1.5 represents the number of terrorist incidents attributed to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party from 1984 – shortly after the beginning of the so-called ‘Second Phase’ of the group – until 2002 when the group reformulated itself and agreed to a ceasefire. Shown in Figure 1.5 is a noticeable flattening of PKK activity after Ocalan’s arrest in 1999. By 2002, there are virtually no violent incidents attributable to the PKK. Controlling for other factors such as the destabilizing military coup or lack of successor, the PKK represents a clear case of when leadership decapitation is effective in stemming terrorism.

One effect that can be discerned from this evidence is that hierarchically structured groups, such as those that emerge from political parties and maintain a like-minded organizational structure, are more likely to rebrand themselves in the wake of leadership decapitation. Although Jenna Jordan, in ‘Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark’, argues that organizational resilience in the form of steady bureaucratization correlative with size and age of terrorist groups works against the success of leadership decapitation, bureaucratization carries with it the possibility for legitimacy. Just as the PKK renamed and reorganized itself in 2003 – first as the KADEK and then as the KGK – hierarchically structured, terror groups have a vested interest in maintaining any form of legitimacy, if not as a militant-political institution, then as a reborn political party with an unscrupulous past.

The African National Congress (ANC), for example, formed a military branch in 1961 and began targeting government facilities, South African military and foreign businesses in an effort to alter or halt the practice of apartheid. When President F.W. de Klerk promised greater inclusivity of black Africans in politics, much of the practice of terrorism by the ANC ceased. In 1990, the ANC became a South African, political party, with party member, Nelson Mandela, elected as President of South Africa in 1994. Similar instances include the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which used terror tactics to protect ethnic Albanians from Serbian-led genocide in Kosovo. Subsequent to U.S. military intervention on behalf the Albanians, the KLA rebranded

---

itself as the Kosovo Protection Corps, allying itself with NATO. Because legitimacy is the foremost currency on the international stage, a group like the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, so structured, was forced to weigh organizational survival against its methodology. In this case, foregoing a history of violence was preferable to dissolution of the party and abandoning the cause of Kurdish independence in what Audrey Cronin refers to as ‘reorienting’ 117.

The Caucasus Emirate (CE) – Dokka Umarov & Chechen Leadership

The case of the Caucasus Emirate demonstrates the resilience of terrorist organizations who enjoy a conglomeration of large bases of regional, popular support, a diffused leadership structure, and who can rationalize anti-state acts of violence and simultaneously galvanize local support by enduring repressive, government counter-terrorism measures. In spite of the loss of nearly every leader the CE has known – most to assassination, but some by apprehension – the group endures for the reasons mentioned above, in addition to religious homogeneity underpinning its acts of violence.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, many territories that had previously been under Russian authority were now seeking autonomous statehood. Included in this number were predominantly Sufi, Muslim, Chechen nationals who conglomerated to form the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CHRI). Two armed conflicts throughout the close of the twentieth-century resulted in an extended, Chechen insurgency against the Russian Federation’s military. Russia’s policy of targeted killings resulted in the deaths of many of the separatist leaders, leaving a crisis of leadership from which the more fundamentalist Salafi faction of Chechens rose to prominence. It was into this tumultuous environment that Dokka Khamatovich Umarov consolidated authority, becoming the President of Ichkeria in 2006. A year later, as an expansion of his earlier movement for a sovereign Chechen state in Russian territory, Umarov established the Imarat Kavkaz or Caucasus Emirate (CE).

The provincial branches of the Caucasus Emirate have demonstrated a preference for suicide type attacks aimed at inciting terror among Russians. Chechen separatists linked with the CE – and often at the behest of Umarov – have been connected with the 2004 suicide bombings of Russian passenger planes, a dual bombing of the Nevsky Express, high-speed train in 2009, the bombing of the Moscow Metro in 2010, the Domodedovo International Airport

117 Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends. p 146.
bombing in 2011, twin suicide bombings of a police checkpoint in Makhachkala (Dagestan) in 2012, the suicide bombing of a public transport bus in Volgograd in 2013, and the suicide bombing at Grozny City Hall in 2014 along with the prolonged firefight against security forces that ensued. The Russian FSB match the Chechen separatists’ brutal tactics, measure for measure with the ‘most aggressive [campaign] of assassinating leaders of violent militant groups’ in modern history. The loose association of *jama’ats*, or Islamic fundamentalist insurgent groups, that comprise the Caucasus Emirate report periodically on activities during the *majilis al-shura* gatherings, but rarely act in concert, if only to repel Russian incursions.

In July of 2013, Umarov and the *majilis al-shura* officially reversed a moratorium on targeting civilians during attacks, telling Chechen operatives to utilize ‘maximum force’ against all those present at the upcoming, 2014 Winter Olympics being held in the Russian city of Sochi with the goal of ‘[disrupting]...these satanic games’. In the aftermath of the December 2013, dual suicide bombings in Volgograd, and a subsequent attack in Pyatigorsk, President Vladimir Putin was incentivised to prevent any acts of terrorism during or targeting the Sochi games. The renewed vigor of Russian security forces came in the form of several operations in Dagestan that left over thirty Caucasus Emirate combatants dead between December 2013 and January 2014. While the timeline remains unclear, in March of 2014, the CE announced Umarov’s death by poisoning in an online posting and Aliaskhab Kebekov was named the new emir. Kebekov would later be assassinated by Russian FSB forces in April of 2015.

**Age**

Established in 2007, the CE had not arrived at the twenty-year standard for organizational resilience to leadership decapitation. The group was a mere six years old at the time of Umarov’s death. Given this fact, the theory of youth being a contributing factor to the deleteriousness of terrorist groups must question why, in spite of young age, the CE did not collapse or weaken. A counter-theory is predicated upon the actual, arguable age of the CE. Consider that the CE is a breakaway terrorist organization, borne out of two wars for Chechen independence and consolidated and separated during an already long-underway, Chechen insurgency. With this in mind, the CE had already accumulated a vast wealth of local support.

---


from Chechen populations endeared to the CE by an indiscriminate, Russian counter-insurgency, battle-hardened CE members who had participated in lengthy, armed skirmishes with Russian army and FSB personnel, and who were united by a shared religion – Salafi Islam. Normally, indecisive terrorist attacks, internal struggle, government-led counter-measures, and a lack of insular structuring are indicative of young terrorist organizations. However, in the case of the CE, none of these factors could be said to be true of the organization, thus making youth a less-than-decisive factor in determining the group’s vulnerability to leadership decapitation.

Structure

Declaring himself the first emir of the Caucasus Emirate, Umarov set up a ruling, consultative body – or majilis al-shura – from all portions of the organization. The membership of consultative body was representative of six or seven different wilayah, or provinces, from the Black Sea to the Caspian. However, as of 2011, five of the seven governing members of the Caucasus Emirate had either been imprisoned or assassinated by Russian security forces. Because the Caucasian Emirate is dispersed in this manner across several provincial areas throughout Chechnya, the leadership itself is mostly self-regulating, with Umarov providing religious directives, the ability to instigate attacks on particular targets, and maintain the power to call a council meeting of the majilis al-shura.

Because Umarov’s role as emir was largely nominal and his death contained, it did little to dissolve or destroy the operational capacity of any wilayah under the control of the Caucasus Emirate. Authority and the autonomy to carry out acts of terrorism came mostly from within the wilayah responsible, thus targeting leadership as the FSB did, even simultaneously, proved largely ineffective. To this end, the same announcement issued by the Caucasus Emirate website declaring Umarov’s death in 2014, also declared the succession of his replacement, Aliaskhab Kebekov. Dear, in Beheading the Hydra, remarks that terrorist leadership is being ‘killed on an industrial scale’, adding that ‘insurgent...cells are being relentlessly “decapitated” by targeted strikes, but...the insurgents [are] more numerous than ever”120. Dear’s pronouncement is supported by the case study of the CE, who, because of diffuse authority across an 800 mile expanse of territory and invariable ability to carry out attacks and survive counter-insurgency attempts, has repeatedly proven resilient in the face of leadership decapitation.

---

Motivation

Like many terrorist organizations examined for this study, there are several overlapping, motivational factors contributing to the impetus for violence. As mentioned in the case study of al-Qa’ida, Salafi Islam is considered an ultra-conservative form of Islam that is often characterized by a desire to remove non-Islamic influences from regions where the sect is in practice. Groups that declare themselves as Salafi or Wahhabi often incorporate violence to achieve these ends. That being said, in the case of the CE, national-separatism is the primary goal of the group, which, rather than being driven by a specific religious directive, endeavors for the sovereign, geographic space in which to implement these religious practices.

Separation from the greater Russian Federation being the ultimate goal of the CE, the terrorist organization has gained significant local support from native Chechens. Given the wealth of this internal support, across a broad region of territory, in it unsurprising that leadership decapitation was unsuccessful in dissolving or destroying the CE. The separatist-nationalist motivation of the CE, cross-cuts with the religious majority of regional Chechens who share Islam as their religion. These factors in tandem provide a viable illustration for the unsuccessfulness of leadership decapitation against the CE.

Measuring Success & Effects

The death of Dokka Umarov retains enough circumstantial doubt to galvanize the Caucasus Emirate to further action. Given Putin’s vow for the ‘total annihilation’ of the terrorists responsible for the 2013 Volgograd bombings, the renewed targeting of Chechen separatists in and around the time of Umarov’s death, and the FSB’s – and its methodologically indiscernible predecessor, the KGB’s – extended history of using poisoning as a means of assassinating political dissidents, it is not unreasonable to assume that the premier emir of the Caucasian Emirate met his demise at the hands of the Federal Security Service.

Consider that poisoning has long been a preferred method of dispatching Russian enemies of state. Russian security forces have assassinated individuals through the clandestine use of poisons before; including, for example, Thamir Saleh Abdullah al-Suwailem – better

known by his nom de guerre, Ibn al-Khattab – in 2002.\textsuperscript{122} A profound, logical leap would not be required to evaluate Umarov’s death – by poisoned food he had ingested – as another probable assassination by Russian, security forces with a preferred weapon of choice.

![Figure 1.6 Caucasus Emirate Incidents (2007–2014)](image)

Figure 1.6 demonstrates the number of terrorist incidents attributed to the Caucasian Emirate from the time of its inception in 2007 until the current date. The data set represented in Figure 1.6 can draw tentative conclusions about this instance of leadership decapitation. The evidence provided by Figure 1.6 also demonstrates the potency of suicide terrorism as indicated by Pape in \textit{Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism}. In it, Pape remarks that groups that incorporate suicide terrorism, as the Caucasus Emirate did, have a limited 'human capital' with regards to operatives who can conduct suicide bombings. However, the strategic implications of this limited, human capital has its advantages – namely with the number of casualties a suicide bomber can inflict with a single attack.

Given the sparse number of terrorism incidents for which the Caucasus Emirate took responsibility in its eight-year life-span – totalling less than fifty – the damage done by high-casualty attacks is apparent. However, as Pape suggested, this relatively small number of incidents belies the high number of casualties inflicted – approximately 1,800 dead and 3,000 injured. Further, beginning in 2012, the number of terror incidents for which the Caucasus


Emirate has taken responsibility has risen and continues to rise with each year, undeterred by the deaths of Umarov, Kebekov and other leaders of provincial jama’ats.

Finally, the Caucasus Emirate’s diasporic structure has proven particularly resilient to counter-insurgency tactics because of what Audrey Cronin describes as the inherent fault with extreme, ‘repressive’ counter-terrorism policy. The author writes:

Repression alone seldom ends terrorism because terrorist groups resort to strategies designed to turn a state’s strength against itself. Indiscriminate, retaliatory police or military force used in a frontal assault, at home or abroad, may set back a movement. Overwhelming – and unscrupulous – use of force may even obliterate groups using terror tactics. But it may be a pyrrhic victory. If the ideas that are the source of popular mobilization persist, repression will be temporary, even counterproductive.  

Compounded by the fact, as Cronin writes, the success of a repressive counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency policy is largely dependent upon the competition ‘between states and communities...over the capacity to mobilize support’, Russian aggression is engaged in a sisyphian struggle. When considering the large territory under the CE’s authority, the diffuse or horizontal leadership structure therein, and the integrated wilayah that comprise them, the failure of this instance of leadership decapitation becomes somewhat more self-evident.

Among the discernable, typological effects that emerge from the case study of Umarov and the CE: When states engage in repressive counter-terrorism measures – with regards to a horizontally-structured organization – leading to the removal of a leader or leaders, a new leader will emerge expeditiously. The CE’s base of power exists in a vast insurgency, protected not only be Salifist, jihadist operatives, but by the existing population seeking legitimacy through statehood, the hydra-like emergence of new leadership is unsurprising. As Robert Pape suggests, when a community views an occupying force as both culturally and religiously foreign, the domestic population is far more likely to incorporate suicide attacks in expelling the perceived, foreign element. This would account for the CE’s extensive use of suicide

---

125 Cronin, Audrey Kurth. How Terrorism Ends. p 145.
126 Pape, Robert A. Dying to Win. p. 86-88.
bombing attacks throughout the entirety of its existence. The diffuse nature of leadership within the CE’s several provincial wilayah also helps to explain the readiness with which new leadership emerges, given that autonomy among the wilayah is guaranteed and constraints are shared by the majilis al-shura, and not a singular leadership figure.

**Aum Shinrikyo (オウム真理教) – Shoko Asahara**

Aum Shinrikyo offers a unique case study in the results of leadership decapitation on a terrorist group whose primary motivation is religious in nature. Leadership decapitation appears to have been successful in the case of Aum Shinrikyo due to the overlapping of several factors, including the timely arrest and prosecution of its leader, Shoko Asahara, the clear hierarchical structure of the group and its reliance on Asahara, as well as the offer of state-sanctioned reprieves for members who provided intelligence on the group. The organizational death of Aum Shinrikyo was furthered by its belief in an apocalyptic scenario which its increasing violence both fed into and likewise caused it to become increasingly erratic subsequent to Asahara’s arrest.

Aum Shinrikyo, which has since rebranded itself as ‘Aleph’, is a religious cult established in 1987 by Chizuo Matsumoto – better known as Shoko Asahara. The clinically blind, former pharmacologist had begun studying esoteric mysticism and Chinese taoism in the early 1980s. By the end of the decade, Asahara had allegedly become obsessed with Biblical, apocalyptic prophecy, combining themes from the *Book of Daniel* and *Revelations* with more eclectic teachings from Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Chinese taoism into what he dubbed Aum Shinrikyo, or ‘Supreme Truth’. In 1989, Aum Shinrikyo gained religious, organizational status with the Japanese government. Believing that the United States would soon bring about a third, global war with the use of nuclear weapons targeting Japan, Aum Shinrikyo sought to preemptively initiate Armageddon. In so doing, Asahara and his cabal would be at an advantage of establishing a new world order out of the post-apocalyptic chaos.

Aum Shinrikyo drew scrutiny early on from the public and governments alike through its unorthodox initiation rituals which often involved the ingestion of LSD or hallucinogenic mushrooms, and the involuntary administration of ECT (Electroconvulsive Therapy). The

---

Japanese government began closely observing the practises of Asahara in 1989 when a former member was found murdered after attempting to leave the group.

From 1990 to 1991, Asahara unsuccessfully lobbied for Aum Shinrikyo’s admittance into Japan’s House of Representatives. With this failure, Asahara and Aum Shinrikyo’s Construction Minister issued a ‘declaration of war’ against the Japanese constitution and its government. Throughout 1993, Aum members made repeated trips to Russia where they purchased substantial amounts of military hardware, including assault rifles, a military helicopter, and components for a nuclear weapon\textsuperscript{128}. Former members have mentioned that between 1991 and 1993, Aum Shinrikyo compiled an 'assassination list' which included those critical of the cult or whose views were seen as threatening the integrity of the group. By this time in 1993, the group had began the illicit manufacture of Sarin and VX compounds. Aum Shinrikyo members used VX to assassinate a dozen detractors and civilians alike from 1994 to 1995.

Aum Shinrikyo had amassed a sizable arsenal of weaponized, chemical agents which, according to Charles Townshend, had the potential ‘to kill over four million people’\textsuperscript{129}. On 20 March 1995, several members of Aum Shinrikyo boarded trains at five stations along the Tokyo subway system. The cult members released Sarin concealed in wadded newspaper by pricking the packaged agent with sharpened umbrellas while aboard various Tokyo trains. The incident killed thirteen people while injuring another fifty. Following the terrorist attack on the Tokyo subway, the Public Security Intelligence agency conducted simultaneous raids targeting Aum compounds across the country, and arresting multiple cult members. The raids also revealed that Aum Shinrikyo had been producing LSD and Methamphetamine as well as stockpiling VX, Anthrax, Ebola and more Sarin cultures which were being prepared for biological weaponization in clandestine laboratories.

Asahara was found hiding in secret room within the walls of a remote compound known as the Kamishuishiki Complex or ‘Sixth Satian’ and promptly arrested. Asahara was indicted on twenty-three counts of homicide in 1995 and remained in prison until he was sentenced to death in 2004. Asahara's death sentence has been repeatedly postponed, most recently in 2012, due to further arrests.


Age

When Asahara was arrested by Japanese authorities in 1995, Aum Shinrikyo had existed approximately eight years. The group continued on under the name ‘Aum Shinrikyo’ for several years, but due to public derision and continued attention from Japanese security, the group split in 2007. From 1999 to 2007 there were no recorded incidents of violence or terrorism attributable to Aum Shinrikyo. Whether we choose to measure Aum Shinrikyo’s demise from Asahara’s arrest (1995) or it’s last act of terrorism (1999), Aum Shinrikyo did not reach the age benchmarks for organizational resilience.

Without reaching the twenty-year milestone, Aum Shinrikyo did not attain the degree of organizational resilience traceable to more bureaucratized, and older terror groups. Aum relied heavily on internal support, fear, and wealthy foreign and domestic donors to continually stimulate the group, while ignoring the factors that make bureaucratized groups more successful.

Structure

At no point during the establishment and the promulgation of Aum Shinrikyo had Asahara shared authority or made structural contingencies to abdicate authority in his absence. That being said, Aum Shinrikyo – considered by authorities a religious cult – maintained varying, organizational rungs wherein different members were privileged with varying amounts of operational information on the group’s activities. With this in mind, and Asahara’s indisputable position as leader, one can establish that Aum Shinrikyo operated as a strictly hierarchical organization, with a stated chain of command.

Following the path of the theory on structure, the hierarchical structure of Aum Shinrikyo, particularly Asahara’s responsibility for providing Aum Shinrikyo with ideological direction, and designating targets for attack, made it more probable that his removal would trigger the dissolution of Aum. In this instance, a kingpin strategy was well-suited to remove Asahara, leaving his group potent but directionless. In the coming weeks and months subsequent his arrest, Aum Shinrikyo promptly unravelled with Asahara at the helm. Another likely that Asahara’s removal had such a profound effect for Aum Shinrikyo was the mode of leadership decapitation that removed him. By arresting Asahara, as opposed to lethal targeting, Japanese
authorities were able to deflate the notion that Asahara was the Christ-like figure he likened himself to, but rather, a criminal, prosecutable by law.

Motivation

Religiously motivated, terrorist organisations such as Aum Shinrikyo pose a unique, counter-terrorism dilemma to the often democratic states from which they are borne. Religious sanctuary and rights that uphold freedom of speech make such states a haven for religious extremism. When compounded by the often tax-exempt and sheltered nature of these groups, they can metamorphose into a different entity entirely; namely one that engages in acts of intimidation, harassment, extortion, internecine violence, and terrorism as in the case of Aum Shinrikyo. However, leadership decapitation’s long term effects hint at some merits to its implementation against such groups. Shoko Asahara’s singular role at the top of Aum Shinrikyo, as its creator, instigator, arbiter of acts of violence, and foremost cleric, made him an extremely vulnerable linchpin, whose removal was a harbinger of Aum’s decline from violent extremism.

Measuring Success & Effects

As Mannes and Jordan suggested, Aum Shinrikyo, as a religious-terrorist group, experienced a surge in violent activity immediately following Asahara’s arrest\(^\text{130}\). During the same week of Asahara’s arrest, Aum members mailed a parcel bomb to the governor of Tokyo, whose assistant was maimed while handling it. Additionally, a hydrogen-cyanide device was only nearly averted from detonation in Tokyo’s third busiest transport hub, Skinjuku station. Further, the Chief of the Japanese, National Police Agency was shot and almost killed outside of his home in Tokyo.

Although acts of retaliation by Aum members occurred in the wake of Asahara’s arrest, the spurt of violence was short-lived, occurring only over the course of three months. The group itself, as Jordan reluctantly iterates, ‘are seen as more likely to have charismatic leaders who are essential to setting and maintaining organizational goals. Thus according to theories of charismatic leadership these groups should be weakened by decapitation. Jordan appears sceptical of the efficacy of leadership decapitation in extremist, religious groups because removing cultish leaders – like Asahara – does not carry with it immediate results. Jordan points

to the often ‘counterproductive’ effects of leadership decapitation in religious groups because it can instigate violence like in the case of Aum. However, examining a longer period of time suggests somewhat different results.

Figure 1.7 illustrates the number of incidents perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyo from the time that the Japanese government afforded political status to the group in 1989, up to two years following Asahara’s arrest in 1997. The data in Figure 1.7 allows for the decline in Aum’s violent activities around the time that the group lobbied for political representation in the Japanese House of Representatives from 1990 to 1992. Also represented in Figure 1.7 is the sharp decline in Aum Shinrikyo incidents beginning in 1995, corresponding to Asahara’s arrest. The number of Aum incidents ceased entirely by the end of 1996. The post-1995 decline can also be viewed as alluding to the arrests of over one hundred Aum Shinrikyo members in the aftermath of the Sarin attack on the Tokyo subway.

Figure 1.7 Aum Shinrikyo Incidents (1989–1997)

In 2000, Aum Shinrikyo renamed itself ‘Aleph’, disavowed any connection to prior members who had engaged in violence and criminality, and further foreshowed future acts of terrorism. This came in part from a public outcry to petition the Japanese government’s abolition of Aum Shinrikyo and its designation as a terrorist organisation by a dozen countries. Aum Shinrikyo is one of the only case studies in this paper that experienced all three attributable

factors that make leadership decapitation uniquely effective at stopping terrorist activity: younger than twenty years, hierarchically structured, and motivated exclusively by a religious compunction.

Within the context of Aum Shinrikyo, a unique effect in this instance of leadership decapitation centers upon Aum’s apocalyptic system of beliefs. Apocalyptic groups, such as Aum Shinrikyo, which exist on the fringes of accepted society, often do so out of the inherent fear that their ideology designates them both as special in possessing some knowledge unknown to the rest of the world, necessitating isolation. This is particularly true for Aum Shinrikyo given that the organization was founded upon the ideal that it had the duty of bringing about the end of the world through artificial, cataclysmic destruction. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service’s report on apocalyptic cults concluded:

Sanctions applied by authorities are often interpreted by a movement as hostile to its existence, which reinforces their apocalyptic beliefs and leads to further withdrawal, mobilization and deviant actions, and which in turn elicits heavier sanctions by authorities. This unleashes a spiral of amplification, as each action amplifies each action, and the use of violence is facilitated as the group believes this will ultimately actualize its doomsday scenario.\textsuperscript{132}

This assessment could in part account for the short-lived but intense period of violence that followed Asahara’s arrest in 1995.

A potential typological effect of Aum’s leadership decapitation can be linked to this ‘spiral of amplification,’ wherein the removal of an extremist, religious leader from a group whose beliefs stem from a desire to witness or precipitate the end of the world can further insulate the group from the outside world and exponentially radicalize the group for as long as it remains unchecked by law enforcement or governmental services. Further, in such groups whose leader is revered as a messiah-type figure, and whose persecution or death is considered one of a number of observable signs for the group, it can reaffirm their resolve in their core of beliefs and ergo, spur them to further acts of violence or terrorism.

However, this should be viewed in the same manner that astrologists and cosmologists view supernovas – dying stars which often burn brightest and hottest before sputtering and ultimately perishing. The continued but directionless resurgence of violence is viewed by some researchers, like Jenna Jordan as resilience to leadership decapitation in religious groups. But I argue that aimless acts of violence or terrorism in the wake of leadership decapitation are akin to a passing echo, emulating the deeds of the leader who was removed from power in an effort to continue his or her mission, but without the purpose or direction, albeit misguided, that originally steered the organization to acts of terrorism. This supernova effect in the form of a lack of directionality, often causes adherents to defect from the organization and divulge information on the group to authorities which only furthers organizational collapse.

Hamas – Yahya Ayyash

The case study of Yahya Ayyash’s assassination during his membership in Hamas, exhibits the dangers of hyper-aggressive counter-terrorism measures, particularly repression and targeted killing. The established wealth of local support that buttressed Hamas, in addition to the religious congruity, and shared perception of Israel as an occupying, foreign force of an opposing religious order, meant that Hamas could endure the loss of Ayyash. Further, the public and gruesome manner of his death resulted in an inadvertent backlash effect – according to Audrey Cronin – that bore martyrdom, revenge squadrons, new recruits to Hamas, and popular promises of revenge against the State of Israel.

Although not a founding member, Yahya Ayyash was the primary bomb-maker and explosives expert for Hamas almost from the time that the organization formed its military wing in 1991. He was considered a primary, decision-making figure among Hamas’s military branch and was responsible for the organization, supplying of tools, and implementation of acts of terrorism that included explosive ordnance. Ayyash had attended Birzeit University in 1987, where he received a degree in Electrical Engineering in 1991. Ayyash had expressed his intent to further pursue a Master’s degree in Sciences at University of Jordan, but was apparently denied doing so by Israeli authorities. Whether this denial directly influenced Ayyash’s decision to join Hamas remains unclear but it is widely believed that he did enter the organization at or around this time. Quickly demonstrating his electrical ingenuity, knowledge of

ordnance, and familiarity with chemical compound reactions, Ayyash gained the moniker, ‘the Engineer’ by which he later became widely known.

Ayyash first constructed bombs for Hamas in late 1992 – early 1993. Ayyash’s name came to be known to Israeli intelligence services when, in 1995, three members of Hamas were taken into custody by the Shin Bet. The would-be suicide bombers were arrested and upon interrogating the men, Israeli intelligence learned the bomb-maker’s identity – Yayah Abd-al-Latif Ayyash, the ‘Engineer’. The attentions of Shin Bet and the Palestinian Authority quickly turned to Ayyash, who by late 1995 had also begun freelance construction of explosive devices for the Islamic Jihad (IJ).

ISA (Shin Bet) learned of Ayyash’s frequent, weekend trips to Gaza City where he regularly visited a friend from his youth. ISA members gave Ayyash’s acquaintance a disposable, mobile phone which Israeli intelligence would use to spy on Ayyash. The ISA did not mention that the cellular phone also contained a small amount (15–50 g) of RDX, explosive plastique which could be remotely detonated. Knowing that Ayyash regularly borrowed his friend’s mobile phone to make calls while in Gaza, ISA handed the mobile over to Ayyash’s friend. On 5 January 1996, ISA learned from an intercepted phone call that Ayyash was using the phone in the district of Beit Lahia, and remotely detonated the internal explosive, killing Ayyash.

**Age**

Although founded in 1987, the Military Branch of Hamas, known as the Qassam Brigades, was founded in 1992, and for the purposes of this paper, I will be concerned exclusively with the latter. At twenty-three years old, the Qassam Brigades has surpassed the two decade marker designated as a factor for organizational resilience to leadership decapitation. It is true, in the case of Hamas, that bureaucratization to the degree that it has disseminated through the organization, is a component to the effortlessness with which Ayyash was replaced. Ayyash’s presence in Hamas for several years had also meant that he had the opportunity to share his engineering, electrical, and ordnance experience to other that could continue bomb-making in his absence. Age has also allowed the Qassam Brigades to fine-

---

tune their bomb-making skills and ability to carry out acts of suicide terrorism. The bureaucratization afforded to Hamas by age, allowed it, on a superficial level, to establish different branches that, in the eyes of some, lends it legitimacy.

Structure

The Qassam Brigades are rigidly, hierarchically structured like a government institution. As a result, the command structure is well-known to many, including Israel’s Shin Bet. The leadership of the Qassam Brigades have repeatedly been targets for leadership decapitation by Israeli security forces since the Second Intifada. However, assassinating Hamas leadership has had mixed, perhaps detrimental, effects on the ability of the organization to carry out acts of terrorism. However, the hierarchical structuring of the Qassam Brigades, and the other branches of Hamas, are self-contained. That is, the leadership of one branch possesses the same relative authority as any leader from another branch of Hamas. As a result, the reality of Hamas leadership is that leadership is in fact decentralized, with leadership of one branch being responsible for the operations of their branch alone. One likely reason why the death of Yahya Ayyash was not fatal to the Qassam Brigades was because of this factor of branch-exclusive, insular leadership that had minimal crossover with other branches.

Motivation

The motivation of Hamas, is primarily nationalistic, though the core of state-building aspirations is to possess an exclusionary, Islamic Palestine. This being said, because the primary goal of Hamas is to secure geographic territory, a directive not pronounced because of religious creed, but from a place of territorial ambition, that I subsume a nationalistic motive. One cannot dispute the importance of religion in discussing the strength of popular support for Hamas, as Islam is as much part of the Palestinian cultural heritage as its geography. The cross-cutting cleavages of religion and nationality are driving factors in the organizational resilience and growth of Hamas. The import of these interacting factors of state aspirations and religion stems also from the fact that the perceived occupiers are a different religion from the natives. Given the tumultuous, historical relationship between Jews and Muslims, it is not remarkable that the aggregation of religion and nationalism are contentious issues, driving the resilience of Hamas in the face of repeated decapitation attempts.
Measuring Success & Effects

Following policy, the ISA and the IDF neither acknowledged nor denied responsibility for the assassination of Ayyash, though it was widely reported that his death was the outcome of a Shin Bet operation targeting the Hamas bomb-maker. Leading up to his death, Ayyash had been at the top of the Most Wanted lists of the Palestinian Authority, the PLO, as well as the ISA. It was reported that more than 100,000 mourners attended Ayyash’s funeral and that, rather than deterring further acts of terrorism, the apparent assassination caused attendees of the funeral to ’[promise] a new Jihad, a holy war against Zionist targets, as soon as possible…[and] to cut out Zionist tongues and cut off their hands’\textsuperscript{135}. In 2010, streets in Jenin, Jericho, Beit Lahia, and Ramallah were all named after Ayyash, petitioned and funded for by the Palestinian Authority\textsuperscript{136}.

Figure 1.8 indicates the number of terrorist incidents perpetrated by Hamas while Yahya Ayyash was the chief bombmaker and coordinator, from his first known used device in 1992, until his death in 1996, including the two, years following. Figure 1.8 controls for Hamas's use of

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{hamas-incidents.png}
\caption{Hamas Incidents (1992–1998)}
\end{figure}


explosives, ordnance, and suicide bombings exclusively as these were the medium with which Ayyash worked.

The immediate short term effect of Ayyash's death is represented in Figure 1.8, where the moderate drop in Hamas's employment of suicide explosions is visible after 1996. However, as with other groups who make use of explosives and suicide attacks, the diminished number of attacks does not accurately represent the number of fatalities that occurred per attack. Examining terrorist attacks from 1980 to 2001, Pape found that suicide, terrorist attacks counted for three percent of the total number of attacks, but 'accounted for almost 48 percent of deaths'. The data set does however allude to Hamas's resurgent trend in suicide terrorism in 1997 and gaining in 1998.

To further illustrate this point, one need look no further than the posthumously-founded, Disciples of the Martyr Yahya Ayyash (DOMYA) group. Between February and March of 1996, the DOMYA, linked to Hamas, carried out four suicide bombings that targeted Israelis, killing upwards of sixty people. Israeli intelligence gained information from one of the group coordinators that the group and its attacks were likely a product of and in direct retaliation for the assassination of Ayyash. To this end, this instance of leadership decapitation has had no productive implications for Israeli counter-terrorism in the years since as Hamas's suicide bombings in the 21st century are just as prolific and often more fatal. According to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since Ayyash's death, there have been approximately 154 reported suicide bombings linked to Hamas, whereas only a dozen occurred within his lifetime.

Leadership decapitation as revenge or retaliation has proven largely ineffectual. This is borne out in the episode of Usama bin Ladin, who, at the time of his death in 2011, had only a minimal operational role, restricted by coalition efforts to find him. Still, his significance as chief architect and facilitator of the 11 September 2001 attacks made him a valuable, symbolic target. Similarly, Shin Bet's choice to assassinate rather than arrest Ayyash can best be understood as an extrajudicial boon to propaganda for the Israeli intelligence program. Ayyash's death also occurred during the Second Intifada when a constant stream of successful, targeted killings of high-value targets were proof that the Israeli counterterrorism campaign was working.

---

As one of the core members of Hamas’s military operations branch at the time, Ayyash could likely have been a source of vital intelligence about the organization. In the words of an Israeli Unit 504, Special Operator, ‘[Hamas operatives] don’t necessarily have to be killed in a battle. You can interrogate them and extract information that will help our forces in the fighting to come’. Ayyash was capable of divulging bomb-manufacturing techniques indicative of Hamas, locations of safe-houses and stockpiles, names of key Hamas members and their organizational roles, as well as Hamas’s counter-intelligence methods. Although coercive interrogation techniques are notoriously unreliable in producing actionable intelligence, IDF officers have a reasonable track-record of getting detainees to produce qualitative information. Ultimately, Shin Bet and the Israeli government decided that Ayyash was better off dead than alive. As Cronin warned, the ‘backlash effect’ of this kind of leadership decapitation can often outweigh the short term benefits of target liquidation.

Discerning a typological effect of leadership decapitation in nationally motivated groups, such as Ayyash and Hamas, has largely to do with the concern for ‘backlash’ effect, amplified by religious and cultural norms that laude violent deaths in pursuit of both religious and nationalistic goals. Nationally motivated, terrorist groups that experience leadership decapitation are less likely to degrade or disband when both religion and statehood are factors at stake. To demonstrate this point, Ganor states in The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle, 

Terrorist [organizations are] usually composed of a group of people infused with an extreme ideology or religious belief, or a combination of the two, who are faithful to their goal and prepared to sacrifice personal and common resources, their personal well-being and on occasion, even their lives, in order to attain their goal.

Robert Pape further suggests that cross-cutting cleavages between occupier and native can exacerbate the likelihood for the native population to resort to suicide terrorism as a means to

144 Ganor, Boaz, and Israel Hertseliyah. The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle. p. 65.
achieve sovereignty. In the case of Hamas, Pape dismisses the cleavage of religious faith as being the primary factor. Rather, when religion and nationality are aggregated as cross-cutting cleavages, the likelihood that the native population will incorporate suicide terrorism into its struggle for national sovereignty grows exponentially\textsuperscript{144}.

**Conclusion**

The implementation of leadership decapitation as a counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency policy is unlikely to cease altogether for the states and agencies that currently make use of it. However, this paper has suggested some typological effects that can be expected in the aftermath of leadership decapitation so as to better understand the probable ramifications of targeting terrorist leadership. The question still remains – Is leadership decapitation an effective strategy? Even in certain circumstances, can decapitation bring about the degradation or dissolution of a terrorist organization? This paper has argued that while the overall efficacy of leadership decapitation as a strategy remains in question, the age, structure, and motivation of groups have likely, typological effects that can be observed from the empirical cases examined and the data that supports them.

Making pronouncements about the efficacy of leadership decapitation on the part of scholarship would still be premature, as the definitions of ‘targeted killing’ and ‘leadership decapitation’ are, themselves surrounded with legal and moral uncertainty. However, this paper can offer some conclusions from the research conducted thus far as to the expectations of leadership decapitation under a specific set of circumstances and typological effects that follow.

First, the likely dissolution of a terrorist organization from decapitation of its leadership can often be determined by its age. The longevity of terrorist organization is generally dependent upon whether it has existed for longer than approximately twenty years. While the twenty-year benchmark has not been conclusively proven as determinant of a terrorist group’s collapse from leadership decapitation, this paper has suggested and provided evidence that it is far less probable.

Longevity carries with it the added benefits of entrenchment, resource consolidation or distribution, recruitment, naming of successors, and establishment of all-important nodes of communication wherefrom acts of terrorism can be carried out, as demonstrated by the cases of al-Qa’ida and the Tamil Tigers, for example. In the case of al-Qa’ida, the age of the organization provided it with established nodes of communication from which it could call on operatives and resources from any number of countries with which it had affiliates. Advanced age also allowed al-Qa’ida to determine new means of circumventing counter-terrorism measures meant to undermine it through consolidating authority and establishing a clear path of succession by way of hierarchical structuring. Financial stability was yet another key facet of the organizational durability afforded to al-Qa’ida by its age. The totality of these attributes ultimately meant that when Usama bin Ladin was eventually killed, the group had contingencies in place for the organization to carry on in his absence, the least of which was an immediate successor in al-Zawahiri.

Similarly, the LTTE’s advanced age, allowed it to support itself monetarily, while organizing a massive resistance to government counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency methods. Although ultimately halted by all-out repressive counter-measures, the LTTE was able to mount a formidable force of fighters, suicide bombers, as well as air and sea operatives who terrorized Sri Lankan civilians, police, and military alike for decades. The LTTE, too had an established hierarchy, not dissimilar to al-Qa’ida’s, with stated leadership and would-be successors. Local and international funding was also afforded consistently to the group through prior nodes of communication. The 2009 incursion into the LTTE territory was likely the only means of dismantling the group in a time-efficient manner because of the organizational resilience factor.

The aforementioned factors dramatically increase a terrorist organization’s ability to perpetrate clandestine acts of terrorism while simultaneously surviving the death or arrest of their leader or leaders. Younger groups are particularly vulnerable to leadership decapitation for the same reasons listed above, with some notable additions. Terrorist groups that are temporally young, also face the tumult of internal distrust, securing safe areas from where to train and operate, acquiring materiel support without drawing the unwanted attention of counter-terrorism agencies, and the general atmosphere of inexperience which can obscure critical judgment and impair the capacity to get operations off of the ground, as I mentioned in the case of Shining Path.
In the case of Shining Path, the inexperience of the group as a militant insurgency worked against it. The inherent distrust of others to lead his organization led Guzman to not seek out a successor to the group, even as he faced capture or death. The general atmosphere of inexperience coupled with Guzman’s cult of personality prevented Shining Path from putting into effect contingencies in the event of leadership decapitation. The group had not been resourceful in securing funds, criminally or legally, and was also unable to fund further acts of violence, had it wanted to, after Guzman ordered his members to surrender.

Second, the internal structure, or lack thereof, of terrorist organizations is a likely determining factor in whether or not such a group can survive the loss of leadership. Groups that are engendered from extreme, political institutions generally retain the structure of the initial political faction. Given the bureaucratized and hierarchical nature of such groups, the evidence suggests that leadership decapitation in these groups is likely to be successful because of the reliance on the leader for operational direction, vision, and maintaining high morale, as in the case of the PKK.

Ocalan and the PKK illustrate the relative ease with which some terrorist groups are dismantled who rely strongly on a single leadership figure to provide the overall direction and motivation to commit acts of terror. Ocalan, whose violent rhetoric coupled with a vision for Kurdish society, made him a fine leader for the PKK and rousing figure behind whom men and women would rally, even in the name of violence. However, the risk a leader runs by consolidating authority is providing his or her enemies a singular figure who can be targeted for removal. This was precisely the case with the PKK. When Ocalan was arrested in Kenya, the organization was gutted by the loss of vision and direction that not only gave an impetus for acts of terrorism, but also directed them. Ocalan, as leader of the PKK further served to galvanize support among disparate groups of Kurds. The factor of a charismatic leader, otherwise unique in this manner, also made Ocalan a prime target for the leadership decapitation which ultimately weakened his organization.

Similarly, because hierarchically structured groups often emerge from legal institutions – such as parliamentary or congressional parties, ethnic representation groups, faith-based, goodwill organizations, etc. – governments that deal with such leaders as criminals and pursue arrest rather than targeted killing as a means of leadership decapitation have a longer lasting
effect on the integrity of the group itself. Portraying leaders of terrorist organizations, that are hierarchically structured, as criminals subject to the rule of law has proven more successful in preventing further acts of violence.

Terrorist organizations with a more horizontal or diffuse leadership structure appear more adept at surviving leadership decapitation, as in the case of the Caucasus Emirate. This can be attributed most strongly to the recognized dispensable nature of the leadership figure as either replaceable, symbolic, or not necessary to the implementation of terrorist operations. When this is the case, leadership decapitation rarely appears to slow the growth or capacity of the larger organization which is likely to hail the former leader as a martyr to the cause and galvanize new leadership to further acts of terror.

The CE has arguably survived more episodes and attempts of leadership decapitation than any terrorist organization in modern history. The group persists in large part because of diffuse leadership system which allows differing regional chapters to be governed by leaders who best embody their regional concerns and who can most effectively muster resources to assail Russian targets. Without the consolidation of authority, the CE was able to command popular support over a tremendous, geographical territory. While one or more CE leaders are killed every year, there are no shortage of replacements for them, due in part to the group’s roots in two Chechen wars, but hardened by repeated incursions by Russian counter-terror forces. Remarkably, in spite of repressive tactics, the CE has survived, arguably as strong as it ever was. The constant presence of leadership allows for the continual formation and implementation of acts of terrorism without a prerequisite pause for fear of leadership decapitation as an existential threat.

Third, terrorist groups whose primary, existential function is derived from religion or ideology are particularly violent in their behavior, viewing the remainder of humanity either as an impediment to the group’s goals or threatening the group itself. However, these groups are also vulnerable to leadership decapitation because of their hermitical nature and reliance on their leadership for ideological guidance, as illustrated by the Aum Shinrikyo case study. Leadership in religiously motivated groups is often a struggle to maintain absolute power through coercion while simultaneously seeking some larger goal by which the only apparent means is terrorism. Thus, leaders are in a constant state of paranoia from endogenous and exogenous shocks that may disrupt their grip on authority. Removing leaders in these types of
terrorist organizations can often cause members to come to the forefront about the group’s activities and serve the effort in minimizing a potential backlash effect from the leader’s removal.

Aum Shinrikyo, at the time of the 1995, Sarin gas attack had an estimated membership of between 800 and 1,500 members, rivalling many, more durable terrorist organizations like Abu Sayyaf with an estimated membership of between 200 and 500. Large numbers of members, however, appear to be more a result of the draw of the message of Aum under Asahara. By virtue of this, the religious vision of the group, which ultimately drove it to acts of violence, is the primary compunction for its acts of terror. Once Asahara was arrested, the group began an erratic, spree of violence. However, this was both aimless, and short-lived. Without Asahara, the primary voice driving and rationalizing acts of terrorism was by and large silenced. To remove Asahara was to remove the rationale for Aum Shinrikyo as a religion, without which the group could not continue to carry out the apocalyptic vision of its creator.

Terrorist groups that have a nationalistic basis for their activities are likely more resilient to leadership decapitation, particularly if they are part of a larger contingent that views themselves as natives repelling an occupying, alien force, which was portrayed in the case of Hamas. Further, when cross-cutting cleavages like ethnic homogeneity and religion are considerations, employing acts of terrorism – especially suicide terrorism – to achieve geographical autonomy become more plausible.

Because the cause is arguably shared by an entire population, it would be unreasonable to believe that removing a leader would have a deleterious effect on groups that utilize terrorism for these ends. Still, Ganor suggests that arresting members from this sort of group and using them for counterintelligence purposes has yielded some success in preventing particular terrorism plots. If leadership decapitation policies are implemented in combatting this typology of terrorist organization, there is likely to be a backlash effect in retaliation as well as a general surge in violence and recruitment to the cause.

---

Policy Implications

One of the more salient issues not widely discussed in this paper is the ethical dilemma implicit in the use of targeted arrests or more broadly, targeted killings. Under the auspices of counter-terrorism, most states appear ready to resort to targeted killing, and can usually sustain doing so with pseudo-legality. Presupposing that utilizing targeted killing or arrest vis-a-vis a method of leadership decapitation is efficacious, state governments and their respective institutions should also consider the ramifications for international, diplomatic relations as well as the perception of being in compliance with international humanitarian law. The backlash effect mentioned in this paper, attributed to Audrey Cronin, is not limited to a violent response from targeted terrorist groups. More developed states can threaten trade restrictions or even the cessation of diplomatic relations if leadership decapitation practices interfere with state sovereignty. Ultimately, the policy of leadership decapitation – in both of the forms mentioned in this paper – should come under judicial and Congressional review – specifically within the United States – before determining who is to be targeted or what legal basis there is to do so, rather than in hindsight.

Leadership decapitation should not be considered a ‘silver bullet’ solution to counterterrorism. Scholarship has hardly come to a consensus on the success of its usage, let alone its short-term and long-term implications for the terrorist groups at which the policy is aimed. In lieu of a moratorium on the policy itself, states should reconsider the issuing of ‘kill orders’ on Most Wanted lists, which further the notion that the death of an organization’s leader or leaders will ultimately be beneficial to a law enforcement or counterterrorism effort. Rather, leadership decapitation is best applied when in conjunction with other counter-terrorism measures. As such, the process and implementation of leadership decapitation requires further investigation and review given its proliferation among state, counterterrorism agencies, and militaries.

Should a state still avail itself of leadership decapitation operations going forward, then its military and counterterrorism agencies should be mindful of the typological effects suggested by this paper. Not every terrorist organization is the same, nor do particular terrorist organizations remain the same in their structure or operations. However, considering the age, structure, and motivation of the terrorist organization in question can elucidate whether a policy
of leadership decapitation is likely to consequently degrade or collapse it or prove altogether counterproductive.
Bibliography


