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The Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation on Al-Qaeda's Group Operational Capacity

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study tests the effects of leadership decapitation on leaders from several al-Qaeda branches to determine whether or not group operational capacity, in terms of ability to produce attacks, is affected. It dually distinguishes between the effects of leadership strikes conducted by the U.S. government and the respective government of the state the particular al-Qaeda branch operates in. I argue that leadership strikes conducted by the U.S. result in a higher number of attacks in the month following a branch leader's death. Consequently, I contend that leadership strikes executed by the respective government of the state in which the al-Qaeda branch operates lead to a lower number of attacks in the month following the leader's death. The results of the study reveal mixed outcomes. One al-Qaeda branch decreased the number and severity of attacks following a U.S. strike while increasing the number and severity of attacks in the aftermath of a strike by the respective government. Another branch produced only one attack with zero casualties or injuries, regardless of which government conducted a strike. The third branch increased attacks following a strike by the respective government, with no data available on strikes by the U.S.

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Chapter 1

Information

What affects a terrorist group's ability to operate? Terrorism scholars, governments, and international organizations perpetually seek the answer to this pertinent question to help extinguish the threat of terrorism worldwide. Research produced a plethora of opinions and evidence. Panels discuss policies at length. The span of internal challenges that afflict groups can consolidate under the issue of agency (Shapiro 2013, Jacobson 2008, Ridley 2008). The principal-agent problem creates a conflict of interest inherent in any relationship where a principal delegates or otherwise places trust in an agent to carry out his or her bidding. In turn, the agent relies on the principal for having made the correct decision for an action. In terrorist organizations, leaders typically, though not always, tend to be the political figureheads and principles of the group that delegate responsibilities to agents, or low-level operatives. Agency problems arise when planning attacks, allocating finances, and keeping members from growing disillusioned from the group's mission (Shapiro 2013, Ridley 2008, Jacobson 2008).

However, despite evidence that such internal circumstances thwart operational capacity, it is quite difficult for external actors, such as governments or international organizations, to instill the conditions for such challenges to suppurate within the terrorist group. Worldwide campaigns engaged in broader efforts to eradicate terrorism such as promoting democracy and alleviating poverty. However, the U.S and other states most commonly target terrorist groups militarily, the topic which this study focuses on. Since the early 2000s, governments relied heavily on leadership strikes, primarily using drones, as the solution for hindering terrorist group

operational capacity. While military raids still employ, the U.S. largely favors the ‘eye in the sky’ for executing leadership decapitation missions. After the international terrorist attacks on September 11th by Al-Qaeda forces, U.S. President Bush rolled out a drone targeted strike campaign to exterminate all terrorist perpetrators, in direct and indirect relation, to the attack (Lewis & Vitkovsky, 2011).

Shortly later, in part as justification for invading Iraq, the Bush Administration coined the Global War on Terror (GWOT) as one of his cabinet’s major foreign policy ventures. Drones are remotely controlled aircraft used for both recreational and military purposes. Military-grade drones’ ability to conduct targeted strikes on enemies without having a human pilot or personnel aboard the craft provides this technology revolutionary advantages and produces enormous implications for the fight against terror. The U.S. increasingly relies on drones as a means for countering terrorism. Since President Bush’s terms, every single U.S. president pursued a targeted killing program. Under President Obama’s administration, the drone policy continued and increased usage in the war on terror (Lewis & Vitkovsky, 2011, The New Foundation, n.d.). President Trump’s administration further bumped up the number of drone strikes and current President Biden’s administration maintained the drone program to weed out terrorist enemies. Clearly, the increasing reliance on drones is salient for U.S. foreign policy. The United States leadership strike program grounds itself in the notion that strikes reduce the ability of terrorist organizations to operate, as indicated by the extensive drone campaigns carried out by consecutive presidents. However, within the growing literature, empirical studies have yet to reach a consensus on the effectiveness of targeted strikes in reducing group operational capacity.

In this study, I focus on the effects of leadership decapitation on al-Qaeda’s group operational capacity. Decapitation strategies involve killing or capturing a leader or an otherwise

prominent figure in a terrorist group. The rationale behind such a tactic contends that removing a leader weakens the organization by creating agency problems, thus deteriorating the group's ability to operate. I define operational capacity as the ability for a terrorist group to perform activities according to their intended aims and mission in a given amount of time. Terrorist activities include the illegal use of violence, particularly against civilians, in pursuit of political objectives as well as recruiting new members, maintaining territorial control, and producing propaganda. I chose to examine the 1-month time period following a leadership strike to identify the immediate and short-term responses in attack number. Controlling for other events that occurred in the state the terrorist group operates in (which might affect the output of attacks), I capture how terrorist groups respond to strikes on their leadership. Extending the time of analysis greater would create more room for extraneous factors to affect the reason behind attack number following a strike.

Studying and analyzing the short-term effects of leadership decapitation efforts identifies the effectiveness of the strategy on the immediacy of the problem. Indeed, analyzing the long-term effects of decapitation on group longevity is important; however, terrorism is an immediate dilemma for many populations. Just as policymakers and governments have a responsibility to protect future generations, their duty includes protecting the current generations under threat of terrorism.

I begin by amalgamating the existing literature on leadership decapitation efforts and the effects of such a strategy on terrorist group operational capacity. Research to date indicates no strong consensus on terrorist attack patterns in the aftermath of leadership strikes and mixed opinions exist regarding which aspects of operational capacity are affected. I move forward and explain my research design and theory and justify my case selections and hypothesis formation.

The subsequent sections qualitatively analyze my results from each case study, and I conclude by describing the implications of my study for policies specific to al-Qaeda.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

A prevalent trend emerging in the literature observes the increase in terrorist attacks following a successful strike on a group's leadership. After coding hundreds of individual drone strikes on a variety of groups between 2004 and 2015, Rigterink concludes that the number of attacks committed by a terrorist group increases in the first six months after a drone strike hits one of its leaders, whereas no change in terrorist violence occurs after a strike targets but misses a leader (2021). In a nuanced approach, Abrahms & Mierau perform an analysis on the conflict zones in Afghanistan-Pakistan (from 2008-2011) and Israel-West Bank-Gaza Strip (2000-2004), assessing the effects of leadership targeted strikes on group military tactics (2017). In the aftermath of a drone strike that killed a group leader, terrorist groups became less discriminate in their target selection by redirecting their violence from military to civilian targets (2017). In a related study by Olney, the number of terrorist attacks on local government-related targets after leadership strikes increased in both Yemen and Pakistan (2011). However, the researcher acknowledges that increased terrorist attacks against host country government targets attributes to the feasibility for groups to attack immediate structures of authority versus outside drone agitators, i.e., the United States in this case (Olney, 2011). As demonstrated, successful leadership decapitation via targeted strikes leads to noticeable changes in group military tactics. The attacks not only increase in the aftermath of strike, but also become less discriminate, targeting civilians and host-government targets. All these authors defined (in their terms) 'operational capacity' to be the output of violence or attacks following a drone strike. As so, the culmination of these studies indicates a consensus that targeted strikes do not affect group operational ability to conduct attacks following leadership decapitation.

However, some scholars suggest otherwise. Focusing on Colombia's use of targeted killings in its conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Morehouse finds that the targeted killing of a FARC leader (at any level of command) associates with a decline in the number of FARC attacks (2014). Interestingly enough, the incumbent administration, in this case President Juan Manuel Santos' presidency, associated with increased numbers of attacks. This indicates that certain governments and the administrations holding office may influence the attack response from a terrorist group following a leadership strike. In a related study by Johnston on decapitation strikes against violent insurgencies engaging in terroristic behavior, the researcher challenges 'conventional wisdom' that insurgents rely on support of the populations while terrorists operate without broad public support (2012). He claims violent insurgents operate in ways similar to terrorists, and the results of his study indicated decreased activity and attacks following decapitation strikes (Johnston, 2012). These patterns develop similarly across groups with varying ideologies and aims, suggesting that decapitation strikes are effective in decreasing further acts of terror from various groups.

Another intriguing facet in the literature dealt with other aspects of operational capacity affected by strikes on leadership. Referring to my definition mentioned previously, operational capacity relates to the ability for a terrorist group to perform any activities that promote or extend their intended aims and missions. These activities include, but are not limited to, recruitment, propaganda output, and territorial control. Mir's comparison of two terrorist groups in Pakistan, al-Qaeda, and the Pakistan Taliban in the north Waziristan region, indicates that indeed certain aspects of operational capacity are affected following targeted leadership strikes. Mir incorporated the multiple use features of drones in analyzing their overall targeted strike effectiveness, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) gathering in

addition to leadership striking. In the time period when higher levels of leadership decapitation coordination existed between the U.S. government and Pakistani host government, both al-Qaeda and the Pakistan Taliban experienced loss of bases and high desertion rates among members (Mir, 2018). This indicates that decapitation affected these groups' holds over membership and territory, crucial aspects for maintaining operational capacity.

Another focus in the literature analyzes the effectiveness of leadership decapitation strikes in reducing propaganda output. The purpose and range of terrorist propaganda varies amongst groups; however, it generally aims to promote the group's agenda, radicalize potential new recruits, and further their cause (Lieberman, 2017, Smith & Walsh, 2013). Logic follows that a disruption in propaganda efforts would affect terrorist group's ability to gain new members or reach wider audiences. Smith & Walsh measured the occurrence of drone strikes and the output of al-Qaeda Central propaganda between 2006-2011 (2013). Gathering information from al-Qaeda statements and communication issued by its formal propaganda branch, as-Sahab Media, the researchers found no effect of drone strikes on propaganda output, neither increasing nor decreasing it (Smith & Walsh, 2013). On the contrary, Bolland, Ludvigsen, & Andre cite the continued publication of Inspire, al-Qaeda's English language online magazine, during and following targeted strikes as evidence that strikes do not affect the capability of terrorist groups to generate propaganda (2018). While the scope of the latter's research was narrower (focusing solely on the production of propaganda from one al-Qaeda magazine source as opposed to all of al-Qaeda's publications like the former), the differing results indicate no clear agreement on the effectiveness of targeted strikes in reducing terrorist propaganda.

As I consolidate the literature I culled, I find variance in opinion regarding the number of attacks a terrorist group conducts in the aftermath of a leadership decapitation. Additionally, I

observe that many studies that analyze different types of terrorist groups fail to differentiate between which government conducted the leadership strikes. I find this interesting, as many terrorist groups possess strong animosities or resentments against certain governments as opposed to others, which may impact a group's attack number in response to a leadership decapitation. As so, my study seeks to not only replicate similar studies on the effects of leadership decapitation, but to focus on one terrorist organization in particular—al-Qaeda. By doing so, I hone in on a specific threat to world security and provide my best analysis for policymakers dealing with al-Qaeda specifically. Additionally, my study takes on a nuanced approach by distinguishing the effects of leadership strikes conducted by the U.S. government and the respective government of the state the particular al-Qaeda branch operates in. This sheds light on whether al-Qaeda discriminates its attack responses amongst various government decapitation strikes and gleans insights for future policy formation regarding the terrorist organization

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyzing the effects of leadership decapitation on various al-Qaeda branches' abilities to conduct attacks after a successful leadership strike. It dually examines whether there is a difference in attack number depending on which government conducts the leadership strike, i.e., the United States or the respective government of the state(s) the branch operates. I conduct three case studies on al-Qaeda affiliates where U.S. and respective local governments targeted members of leadership. I opted for the most-similar case study approach to maintain control over as many variables as possible. All three case studies are formally affiliated, Sunni Islamist terrorist organizations with the same mission as al-Qaeda central: to rid the Muslim world of foreign, particularly Western, influence and establish Shariah-based Islamic governments. Importantly, all three branches pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda's core and central command.

I chose to focus on al-Qaeda affiliates rather than al-Qaeda Central because of the terrorist organization's morphing from a hierarchical to a more decentralized structure. Jenna Jordan, author of one of the most comprehensive books on leadership decapitation, refers to al-Qaeda as a "meta-organization" because it is "composed of many different and independent organizations and individuals characterized by their level of autonomy and their pursuit of shared goals" (p. 152). Unlike Osama bin Laden, the former charismatic leader and face of the entire al-Qaeda network, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader, claims no hierarchical control over al-Qaeda's affiliates (Glenn, 2015). Rather, al-Qaeda's core focuses on emitting the organization's overall message instead of managing day-to-day operations (Farrall 2011, Glenn 2015, Moghadam 2013, Soufan 2021). U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, who led Joint Special

Operations Command and served as commander of U.S. and NATO forces in 2009 and 2010 in Afghanistan, concurs with the waning hierarchical status of al-Qaeda, stating, “Al-Qaeda in Iraq’s lieutenants did not wait for memos from their superiors, much less orders from bin Laden. Decisions were not centralized but were made quickly and communicated laterally across the organization” (2011). Although formal affiliates must consult with al-Qaeda central before executing ‘large-scale attacks,’ they operate independently with their own leadership (Glenn, 2015). As such, I conducted case studies on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS), and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQAP is based in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and AQIS is based in Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. AQIM is an Algerian Salafi-Jihadist militant organization operating in the African Sahel region, which includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea. The unit of analysis is the terrorist group, or al-Qaeda branch. I chose these cases because they represent active al-Qaeda branches with leadership members targeted by U.S. and other government strikes in each group. This allows me to discern, on a group-level, the responses to leadership decapitation through attack number.

I make a crucial assumption in this study regarding terrorist group operational capacity. Mirroring several scholars discussed in the previous literature section (Abrahms & Mierau 2017, Olney 2011, Rigertink 2021), I assume that a decrease in attacks following a leadership strike associates with a decrease in operational capacity. I claim that conducting attacks is an integral facet of operational capacity in terrorist organizations. After all, the U.S. classifies a terrorist or terrorist group as one that commits and engages in terrorist activity, i.e., violence (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). As so, if attacks remain at the same level following a leadership strike, then a group’s ability to orchestrate and conduct operations remains unaffected. If attacks

increase, it further indicates that ability to commit attacks remains not only unaffected, but rather reinforced for some reason.

I denote both U.S. and respective government strikes on leadership as independent variables. The dependent variable in this study is the level of violence exhibited from an affiliate after one of its leaders is successfully targeted, measured by the number of attacks during the 1-month period following a strike.

I utilize two terrorism databases for my analysis: The Mapping Militants Project (MMP) by Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). The MMP includes 112 full profiles of militant organizations, providing detailed information and statistics on group organizational structure, strategy, attacks, interactions, and mapping relations with other militant groups over time. I utilize the MMP's list of leadership to extract information about strikes on leaders in the al-Qaeda branches of interest in this study. The GTD boasts the most comprehensive unclassified database on terrorist incidents in the world, including more than 200,000 terrorist attacks in its archives. This database includes information on worldwide terrorist attacks from 1970 through 2019, specifying date and location of the attack, weapon and target type, number of fatalities, casualties, and injuries, and—when identifiable—the perpetrator. I use the GTD's search features to hone in on branch attacks in the 1-month aftermath following a strike on an al-Qaeda affiliate leader.

Important to note, that the GTD contains separate perpetrator identifications for AQAP (which the database categorizes as active in only Yemen), al-Qaeda in Yemen, and al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. Since MMP's AQAP profile is based in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia and

categorizes the group as a whole, I also categorize AQAP in my research as including both GTD perpetrator identifications for attack count. As so, when I filtered searches for attacks committed by AQAP before and after leadership strikes, I included all three GTD perpetrator profiles.

Additionally, while the MMP provides information on leadership names, dates of death or arrest, and cause, some details remain omitted. In cases where it was unclear what government issued an attack on leadership, I combed through news articles and government releases to find which government announced the strike on the terrorist leader or otherwise took credit for the decapitation. For example, in the case of Said Ali al-Shihri, AQAP's deputy emir, MMP listed his death because of a "military operation in Yemen" (n.d.). Through further research, I concluded that the Yemeni government took credit for the strike, as Yemeni officials released a statement (Mazzetti, 2013).

Another discrepancy I faced regarded inexact dates of death. As I conducted analysis on attack numbers following a leadership strike, I accounted for dates by skewing the timeline slightly to include an additional month to account for any missing days. For example, in the case of Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, a top commander in AQIM killed in Mali, MMP listed only a month and year for the date of death (February 2013). As so, I extended the timeline for attacks prior to and following his death from January 1, 2013 through April 28, 2013.

Chapter 4

Theory and Hypothesis

I situate my hypothesis in the framework of Bryan C. Price's work on targeting top terrorists through leadership decapitation. Price establishes two conditions for leadership decapitation to be effective: terrorist leaders must be deemed important by the group, and, in the event of a successful leadership strike, leadership succession must be cumbersome (2012). Terrorist groups fall susceptible to leadership decapitation especially if they are violent, clandestine, and values-based organizations.

Price argues that the violent nature of terrorist groups removes conventional mechanisms that ensure a leader's smooth accession to power, such as an "authority to ensure compliance from subordinates" (2012). In violent organizations, as demonstrated by al-Qaeda's founder bin Laden, leaders rely on charisma to keep agents in agreement with the group's mission and leadership changes. The clandestine nature of terrorist organizations, Price continues, makes succession into leadership positions difficult because of information gatekeeping within the higher ranks. Leaders hesitate to institutionalize their operations for fear of jeopardizing information or risking discovery by outsiders. Therefore, Price notes, individual cells within terrorist organizations often distance themselves and their information from one another to avoid compromising the entire group. Lastly, a values-based organization struggles more with leadership succession because leaders must possess particular skills to relay the vision and mission of the group in addition to appealing to current members and recruits. In non-values-based organizations, such as those operating on the basis of monetary profit, replacing leaders is easier, Price contends, as incentives exist for members to fill in the role of leader, despite the

risks associated with it. Typically, the leader receives a higher financial compensation. In the case of a value-based organization, a true leader believes in the cause, and not material gain.

I add to Price's discussion regarding the importance of terrorist leaders and the three characteristics that make it difficult for leadership succession. Leaders are crucial to a terrorist organization given the risk associated with their position. Particularly in a values-based terrorist organization, where a leader essentially stands for the overall mission rather than any monetary or terrestrial gain, only ideologically committed members are incentivized to fill the role. Additionally, governments and watchlists publicly identify leaders while other agents within the organization remain unnamed. So, I argue, removing a leader exposes a gap in the terrorist group and leaves members grappling with a void to fill.

Given Price's theoretical framework in conjunction with the literature on the topic, I argue that al-Qaeda encompasses all three organization characteristics that make leadership succession difficult—violent, clandestine, and values-based— and so, leadership decapitation effectively hampers the group's operational capacity for conducting attacks. Al-Qaeda and all of its affiliates conducted violent attacks since its inception in 1988, the most infamous and deadliest being the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. The organization evaded demise over the past 33 years by operating clandestinely. More importantly, however, its withstanding vision of establishing Shariah law and removing foreign power and influence remains. Osama bin Laden embodied the importance of al-Qaeda's mission, and after his death on May 2, 2011, it took more than a month for the announcement of the new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, on June 16, 2011, indicating potential difficulty in leadership succession.

Having demonstrated why leadership decapitation should effectively hinder operational capacity, I move towards discriminating between which government conducts the leadership

strikes. In my study, I distinguish between the effects of U.S. and local government strikes in order to identify variance, if any, in group attack output. Historically, al-Qaeda lamented the U.S. and continues to spew anti-West rhetoric. Beginning with the group's inception and Osama bin Laden's rise to leadership, his first public call for action against the United States came in the form of his 1996 fatwa (a formal ruling or interpretation of Islamic law given by a qualified scholar). Titled Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Place, al-Qaeda formally launched its global jihad against the U.S. (Jacquard, 2007). With the U.S. maintaining an active military presence in the Middle East for decades now, resentment and grievances grew against the interference of the U.S. in local Muslim affairs. This backlash produces fertile ground for al-Qaeda, among many other terrorist organizations, to incorporate the U.S.' military involvement and its subsequent collateral damage in their propaganda and recruitment efforts. A Pew Research survey, during the time period of my study's focus, indicates the global opposition to the U.S.' use of drones in various continents and regions, with the Middle East's favorability of the U.S. ranking substantially lower than other continents. Only 30% of Middle Easterners positively viewed the U.S. and the second lowest approval came in at 65% with Latin America (Pew Research Center, 2014). With large portions of the Middle Eastern civilian population harboring ill-feelings towards U.S. drone strikes, terrorists capitalize in this regard by attracting more supporters.

Dually, in the same time period as the previous Pew Research Center survey on Middle Eastern opinions on U.S. involvement in the war on terror, the region welcomes local government efforts in quelling terrorist actors active in the region. According to another Pew Research Center survey, al-Qaeda received negative marks in all 14 countries surveyed (2014).

This indicates that while local populations condone terrorist activity, they also disfavor U.S. involvement in absolving terrorism in the Middle East.

With this, I generated two hypotheses prior to conducting my study. Both test the independent variables (leadership strikes by the U.S., and leadership strikes by respective governments) against the dependent variable (the number of attacks conducted in the 1-month aftermath of a leadership strike). Morehouse's research on the FARC in Colombia, in which he categorizes the organization as having shifted from a centralized, hierarchical structure to a decentralized structure, revealed decreased numbers of attacks overall following leadership decapitation operations. Additionally, his study revealed that strikes by particular governments, i.e., Santos' administration, associated with higher levels of attacks from the FARC, indicating that attack responses from terrorist groups might differ depending on which government conducts the decapitation. As so, I hypothesize that al-Qaeda branches, due to their waning hierarchical structure and anti-Western government rhetoric, will conduct higher levels of attacks following a U.S. leadership decapitation versus the respective government of the state.

H1: If the U.S. conducts a leadership strike, then a higher number of attacks will occur in the month following the leader's death.

H2: If the respective government of the state in which the branch operates conducts a leadership strike, then a lower number of attacks will occur in the month following the leader's death.

Chapter 5

Results and Analysis

Case Study 1: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) formed in 2009 when the Saudi Arabian government drove the Al Qaeda branch active within its borders into Yemen. This prompted the initial merger of the Saudi and Yemeni al-Qaeda affiliates, creating a single group under the joint name of AQAP. As mentioned previously, the GTD still identifies separate perpetrator profiles for al-Qaeda in Yemen and al Qaeda in Saudi, though the groups are integrated. Following the merger, AQAP officially began to launch and claim attacks within and beyond Yemen and Saudi Arabia's borders. Considered a "primary beneficiary of the civil war in Yemen," AQAP exploited the dire humanitarian and civil crises in Yemen in order to bolster its operational capacity (Mapping Militants, n.d.). The onset of the war since 2014, primarily over government control between the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi-led Yemeni government and the Houthi armed movement (along with their supporters and allies), created a power vacuum for AQAP to maintain territorial control, raid banks, and establish tax ports (International Crisis Group, 2017). Currently, U.S., Yemeni, and Saudi forces maintain drone strike programs against AQAP, with strikes peaking in 2017 after a decapitation mission resulted in the death of a U.S. Navy SEAL.

After concluding the results of my research, I supported neither of my hypotheses. Overall, AQAP decreased the number and severity of attacks (measured by fatality and injury count) in the 1-month period following a leadership strike by the U.S. government. On the other

hand, AQAP increased the number and severity of attacks in the 1-month following a leadership strike by both the Yemeni and Saudi governments. Table 1 below outlines the results.

Figure 1 AQAP

Government Committing Leadership Strike	Terrorist Leader Name	Leadership Position	Date of Death (DOD)	1 Month <i>Prior</i> to DOD A) Number of Group Attacks B) Total Fatalities from Group Attacks C) Total Injuries from Group Attacks	1 Month <i>Following</i> DOD A) Number of Group Attacks B) Total Fatalities from Group Attacks C) Total Injuries from Group Attacks
United States	Nasser al-Wuhayshi	Founder & Leader	June 12, 2015	A) 5 attacks B) 60 fatalities C) 8+ unknown injuries	A) 5 attacks B) 2+ unknown fatalities C) 0+ unknown injuries
United States	Anwar al-Awlaki	Chief Ideologue	September 30, 2011	A) 11 attacks B) 44+ unknown fatalities C) 13+ unknown injuries	A) 3 attacks B) 2 fatalities C) 4 injuries
Yemen	Said Ali al-Shihri	Deputy Emir	September 10, 2012	A) 12 attacks B) 34 fatalities C) 27 injuries	A) 17 attacks B) 31 fatalities C) 38 injuries
Saudi Arabia	Nayif Mohammed Saeed al-Qhatani	Senior Leader	April 2010	A) — B) — C) — *see analysis discussion	A) — B) — C) — *see analysis discussion

Given the data collected, I suggest a few reasons for the observed effects on the dependent variable (level of violence). I explain the discriminatory retaliation in response to U.S. strikes and respective government strikes in terms of proximity and opportunity. AQAP may respond to a strike by Yemeni or Saudi Arabian forces more readily because the branch operates within those states. Rather than orchestrating a costly, and rare, transnational attack, it is much more feasible, in terms of geographical and financial proximity, to orchestrate a severer attack. I

likened this to Olney's argument that terrorist groups are more likely to carry out attacks on immediate structures of authority, such as local government officials, government buildings, police, and military (2011).

The results also coincide with several trends in terrorism studies, including the shifting locus of terrorism to the Middle East and the decrease in international terrorism overall (Kim & Sandler 2020, Ritchie et al. 2019, Institute for Economics & Peace 2020). AQAP conducts most of its attacks in Yemen, and to a lesser degree in Saudi Arabia.

Case Study 2: al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

Founded in 2014, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is based in Pakistan but carries out operations in Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Al-Qaeda Central's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, created this branch with intentions to "recreate the Islamic caliphate that once stretched into these regions" (Mapping Militants, n.d.). Despite the declared visions of al-Zawahiri, AQIS unsuccessfully gained traction and support outside of Pakistan. AQIS exclusively conducted attacks in Pakistan and Bangladesh to date, with no operations occurring in the other states (Global Terrorism Database, n.d.). Analysts note the existence of an ideological disconnection between the Muslim population in India and the Salafi-Islam of al-Qaeda's caliphate, which contributes to the inability for AQIS to gain local fighters and support. The branch faces difficulties in Afghanistan and Bangladesh as well, due to competition with rival terrorist organizations — the Taliban and Hefazat e-Islam, respectively—monopolizing control and denying AQIS a footing in the states (Counter Extremism Project, 2020). Dually, the al-Qaeda branch failed to establish rapport with Muslims in Myanmar, despite al-Zawahiri's confident assertions it would reunite the Muslim lands in the Indian Subcontinent. Unlike in Yemen, where AQAP took advantage of the cracks in civilization sustained through civil war, AQIS failed to significantly recruit or radicalize in these circumstances. Al-Qaeda's messaging to the Rohingya, one of several Muslim minority groups in Myanmar, called for the taking up of arms and fighting against the Burmese Buddhists, yet not reports indicate such cases occurred (Counter Extremism Project, 2020).

In June 2017, AQIS released a 20-page “Code of Conduct” publication that recapitulated the group’s intentions for conducting operations and attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh and pledged another *bay’ah* (an oath of allegiance) to al-Qaeda Central. More importantly, the “Code of Conduct” identified Americans as key targets of the branch and called for increased attacks on American soldiers and civilians in the states mentioned above (Hamming, 2019). Given this reiteration of animosity and call to target Americans as exemplified in the pages of the “Code of Conduct,” I expected (as indicated in my first hypothesis, *H1*) increased numbers of attacks in the month following a U.S. strike on AQIS leadership. However, the results indicate otherwise. I confirmed neither of my hypotheses in this case study. As displayed in Table 2 below, an overall decrease in the number of attacks, fatalities, and injuries in the month following a U.S. strike on members of AQIS’ leadership. Following both Bangladeshi authority apprehensions and Pakistani government captures, attacks and fatalities increased in number by 1, or remained at the same level as the month prior to the leadership strike.

Figure 2 AQIS

Government Committing Leadership Strike	Terrorist Leader Name	Leadership Position	Date of Death (DOD)	1 Month <i>Prior</i> to DOD A) Number of Group Attacks B) Total Fatalities from Group Attacks C) Total Injuries from Group Attacks	1 Month <i>Following</i> DOD A) Number of Group Attacks B) Total Fatalities from Group Attacks C) Total Injuries from Group Attacks
United States	Ahmad Farouq	Deputy Emir	January 15, 2015	A) 1 attack B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries
United States	Qarri Imran	Shura council member	January 5, 2015	A) 1 attack B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries
United States	Imran Ali Siddiqi	Shura Council Member	October 11, 2014	A) 1 attack B) 1 fatality C) 1 injured	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries
Bangladesh	Mawalana Mainul Islam	Chief Coordinator	July 2, 2015	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries
Bangladesh	Mawlana Zafar Amin	Chief Advisor to the Coordinator	July 2, 2015	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries
Pakistan	Shahid Usman	Top Commander	December 12, 2014	A) 1 attack B) 1 fatality C) 0 injuries	A) 1 attack B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries

An interesting result emerged from this case study. All strikes on AQIS leadership occurred within a 9-month time span during which all the leaders were either killed or apprehended by U.S. or respective government forces. Additionally, the level of violence, in terms of attack, fatality, and injury number toggled between 0-1 for all of the attacks. While my study focused on the month prior to and immediately after a leadership strike, I extended my analysis to see how many total AQIS attacks occurred during the 9-month time span governments actively consolidated decapitation efforts. Between October 11, 2014, the date of death of the first leader of AQIS until 1-month past the date of death of the last leader, August 2,

2015, AQIS committed only 6 attacks, ranging from 0-4 for fatality and injury count. This potentially indicates that joint government leadership decapitation efforts effectively decrease operational capacity (in the sense of attack output) if conducted in close proximity to one another. Such an analysis mirrors the results of Mir's study on L&S where higher levels of leadership decapitation coordination between the U.S. government and Pakistani host government led to the Pakistan Taliban experiencing decreased operational capacity in terms of loss of bases and high desertion rates among members (2018). As discussed previously, operational capacity extends to any activities that further a group's intended aims and mission in a given amount of time, which includes attack output, territorial holds, recruitment levels, and propaganda output.

I acknowledge several nuances to the analysis of AQIS' case study. First, the group's size, though not officially calculated, is among the smallest officially affiliated branches of al-Qaeda (Mapping Militants, n.d.). Additionally, AQIS faces various competitor terrorist groups in the states it claims to operate in, particularly in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Unlike AQAP in Yemen and Saudi that established itself as the prevalent terrorist group, AQIS faces additional obstacles to gaining prominence. With the supposed low membership of the branch in conjunction with group competition, leadership decapitation efforts likely noticed a greater effect on group violence output in AQIS rather than larger, more established groups. This nuance affects the generalizability of the case study, as circumstantial situations in other states cannot be replicated for other al-Qaeda branches, let alone apply the same conditions to groups with differing ideological aims.

Case Study 3: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, also known as Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM), pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda Central in 2006 following a turnover in leadership and a switch in group affiliations. Originally known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the group renamed itself under the leadership of Nabil Sahraoui, an individual included in this case study. This branch is based in what is known as the Islamic Maghreb, the region of North Africa including Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. However, it also operates in the African Sahel region in the middle of the African continent, including Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria. The instability fueled by the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, the series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions, benefited AQIM's operational capacity. Many fighters in the African Sahel left to fight in the conflicts waging in Syria and Libya, and upon returning, brought with them many radicalized foreign fighters (Laub & Masters, 2015). Additionally, regional crises in the states the group operated in led to an influx of arms sent to the Middle East and North Africa, granting AQIM the opportunity to profit by selling arms to combatants (Laub & Masters, 2015). AQIM infamously engages in the crime-terror nexus, with involvements ranging from kidnapping for ransom and activity in the drug, arms, and human trafficking trade.

The data from this case study yielded limited, mixed results. I analyzed only one leadership decapitation instance due to the constraints on available samples. Additionally, no records exist of any U.S. decapitation strikes on an AQIM leader, so I could not compare attack response on strikes by the U.S. and respective governments. However, the pattern differs for AQIM attack outputs levels following decapitation strikes compared AQAP and AQIS. As

demonstrated in Table 3, in the month following Abdelhamid Abu Zeid’s death by Mali forces, AQIM committed zero attacks, a decrease from 3 attacks that yielded a combined total of 4 fatalities and 16 injuries in the month prior.

Figure 3 AQIM

Government Committing Leadership Strike	Terrorist Leader Name	Leadership Position	Date of Death (DOD)	1 Month Prior to DOD A) Number of Group Attacks B) Total Fatalities from Group Attacks C) Total Injuries from Group Attacks	1 Month Following DOD A) Number of Group Attacks B) Total Fatalities from Group Attacks C) Total Injuries from Group Attacks
Algeria	Nabil Sahraoui	Leader of the GSPC (the predecessor to AQIM)	June 20, 2004	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries
Mali	Abdelhamid Abu Zeid	Top Commander	February 25, 2013	A) 3 attacks B) 4 fatalities C) 16 injuries	A) 0 attacks B) 0 fatalities C) 0 injuries

As this case study arises from limited data, it is difficult to postulate why not only a decrease in attacks occurred but also why no attacks took place whatsoever in the month following an AQIS top commander’s decapitation. However, the discussion I conjecture relates to the Mali War occurring at the time and the involvement of AQIM in the crime-terror nexus. In January 2012, several insurgent groups began fighting a campaign against the Malian government for independence of the northern region, Azawad. A year later in January 2013, following a UN Security Council decision to grant foreign intervention, French-led African forces began a military offensive to assist the Malian military in dislodging Salafi-jihadi militant groups, AQIM included, who gained territorial control over populations in Northern Mali

(Boukhars, 2013). According to analysts as well as attack patterns, the foreign intervention exhibited short-term success in quelling insurgent attacks, stopping “Mali’s quick descent into chaos” (Boukhars, 2013). As the leadership strike on Abdelhamid Abu Zeid by the Malian government occurred on February 25, 2013, I attribute the lack of AQIM attacks in the month succeeding his death to the French foreign intervention in the Malian War.

Additionally, AQIM is noticeably more profit-oriented than other al-Qaeda branches, with its involvements in the crime-terror nexus and Mapping Militants ascribing it as “one of the wealthiest terrorist organizations in the world” (n.d.). Relating back to my theoretical discussion previously, the data from my study counters Price’s discourse on the effects of leadership decapitation. As Price argues, values-based organizations struggle *more* with leadership succession than profit-based organizations. The researcher contends that difficulty in leadership succession is one of two conditions (the other being the importance of the leader to the organization) for decapitation efforts to effectively weaken a group’s longevity, and thus, ability to conduct attacks. Dually, Price argues that profit-based organizations typically replace leaders more readily, allowing them to continue attacks. Yet, AQIM exhibited no attack increase in the aftermath of Zeid’s death. I attribute this to not only the efforts by the foreign intervention in Mali, but also to the group likely doubling down on criminal activities to preserve its longevity. As so, attack capacity likely hindered in this case, as Mali’s war and international military involvements thrust AQIM into a short-term survival mode.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study sought to determine how terrorist group operational capacity alters in the month aftermath of a leadership decapitation. Through analyzing several al-Qaeda branch case studies and their responses to leadership strikes, I determined a null finding in regards to the number and severity of attacks following strikes by the U.S. government and respective government of the state(s) each branch operates within. With varying results, the outcomes of my hypothesis-testing indicate no significant relationship between the experimental variables.

After analyzing strikes on AQAP leadership, this al-Qaeda branch behaved opposite to what I originally predicted. Overall, AQAP *decreased* the number and severity of attacks in the 1-month period following a leadership strike by the U.S. government. Following a strike by either Yemeni or Saudi governments, AQAP *increased* the number and severity of attacks in the 1-month aftermath. As discussed previously, the proximity of local government targets versus transatlantic U.S. targets might explain why an uptick of attacks occur following a strike by the respective governments. Additionally, interstate terrorism decreased overall and the locus of terrorism situated itself in the Middle East, where instability from on-going intrastate conflicts, such as the Yemeni Civil War, generate societal fissures for terrorist groups to take advantage of. Evidence of this lies in the results from AQIM, where Mali's Civil War prompted the terrorist branch to turn towards the crime-terror nexus to supply itself. However, if proximity affected the ability to commit attacks, then groups would direct their attacks on U.S. government institutions located within the respective states, such as U.S. embassies or military posts. A limitation of the GTD, which would have proved helpful in this study, relates to its categorization of target type.

The government-related targets listed for each attack include Diplomatic, General, Military, and Police. Future research would benefit from distinguishing between government target type following an attack on leadership. This would test the argument of proximity in addition to whether or not the effects of leadership decapitation vary depending on which government conducts strikes. For example, if AQAP targeted U.S. institutions in Yemen or Saudi Arabia following a decapitation strike on a leader, this would indicate retaliation towards the U.S. specifically, and not a response for a response's sake.

The analysis of AQIS revealed different outcomes, with the number of attacks and level of violence decreasing to 0 in the 1-month aftermath of all leadership decapitation efforts (except for one), regardless of which government conducted the strike. This case study differed from the others on account that all decapitation strikes occurred within a 9-month time period, suggesting that joint-government, consecutive leadership strikes yield the most effective results for decreasing, if not almost entirely eliminating, terrorist attacks. However, this branch of al-Qaeda is noticeably weaker than most, given its membership size, attack outputs, and leadership count (Mapping Militants, n.d.). AQIM trails not far behind with an estimated 1000 members in Algeria and smaller numbers in the Sahel region, including Chad, Mali, and Mauritania according to a 2015 update. Such observations point to reasonable conjectures that leadership decapitation, especially via joint-governmental efforts, is effective on small-scale groups.

Future Research Proposals

While this study produced a null finding, future research may benefit by testing the hypotheses with more group cases. While I expected the documented, historical opposition and

animosity towards the West to prompt al-Qaeda branches to react more severely to U.S. leadership strikes as opposed to local government strikes, incorporating more case studies on al-Qaeda affiliates may reveal a nuanced image. However, I believe the hypotheses are limited to groups with Salafi-Islamic ideologies due to their ingrained resistance towards Western governments. Future research might extend beyond U.S. strikes and evaluate al-Qaeda's responses to other Western governments' leadership strikes, such as the United Kingdom's participation in drone warfare. The U.K. conducts strikes on terrorist organizations both by its own Royal Air Force and also through its joint-coordination with the U.S. program. However, its involvement in terrorist leadership decapitation efforts remains largely shrouded from public eye (Jones, 2017). Analyzing the attack response on U.K. strikes will not only provide a nuanced understanding of how al-Qaeda responds to other Western counterterrorism efforts, but also would offer transparency on the U.K government's participation in leadership decapitation

Policy Implications

The findings from this study yield several implications for policy making. Leadership decapitation effectiveness varies; however, governments and militaries must not rely on this as their sole strategy. Instead, counterterrorism campaigns should incorporate decapitation strikes as a tool in an array of methods used. Decapitation is not a "silver bullet," as many scholars acknowledge (Jordan 2019, Yaoren 2019, Lyall 2015, Johnston 2012, Price 2012). Dismantling terrorist groups and preventing their survival rate remains the goal for policymakers. As so, governments must critically evaluate the contexts in which the targeted group operates in before conducting leadership strikes. Effectiveness is situational. Is the state in which the terrorist group

operates in the midst of a civil war or conflict? If so, as gleaned from the results of AQAP, attacks will still persist. The instability generated from civil conflict aids terrorist groups, so decapitating a leader likely will not dismantle the group. It may temporarily decrease attacks while the group grapples with leadership replacement. However, aided by the benefit of the government's civil war distraction and not having to operate as covertly as before, terrorist groups may resume attack planning and committing, in addition to a slew of illegal activity that financially and operationally assists them, as evidenced by AQIM during the Mali Civil War. In cases like these, joint-government efforts should turn towards squandering the supply chains that benefit terrorist groups.

Al- Qaeda's funding proliferates in the avenues of donations and ransoms (FATF, 2021). While lamentable, governments must not give in to terrorist ransom demands. By doing so, a pattern emerges similar to Israel's case, where the state engages in paying ransoms for Israeli citizens held captive by Hamas, a Palestinian Sunni-Islamic terrorist organization. By identifying the state's weakness, Hamas received a steady influx of funds directly from Israel as a result. While Israel's mandatory conscription policy prompts the state to protect its citizens notwithstanding, other states should not follow suit. Additionally, policy makers must devise greater security and clearance measures to deal with al-Qaeda's stream of donations. In some instances, branches collected funds under the guise of charities (Williams-Grut, 2015). Donations get broken up into small amounts and passed through minor money-transfer shops with few or nonexistent identification requirements (Williams-Grut, 2015). The respective governments of the states al-Qaeda branches operate within must act and implement stricter checks on financial flows, perhaps by establishing national governmental branches (separate from civilian internal revenue services), dedicated to monitoring suspicious financial movements in areas where al-

Qaeda operates. Once al-Qaeda branches experience deprived supply chains, leadership strikes enter the equation to further splinter the group and leave it with no authoritative direction in how to deal with its waning financial longevity.

While al-Qaeda's branches survived the eliminations of multiple leaders, across U.S. and respective government efforts, the combination of withering the group's financial resources down and then striking at the remaining leadership may cripple and ultimately dismantle the group. Additionally, as al-Qaeda's hierarchical structure morphs into the likeness of a decentralized organization, policy makers should aim to eliminate al-Qaeda branches as they act as support brachii to the main body of al-Qaeda central.

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- The Pennsylvania State University Schreyer Honors College, University Park, PA Expected May 2022
- Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Bachelor of Arts in Global and International Studies
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LEGAL AND RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

- Bucks County District Attorney's Office**, Intern, Doylestown, PA March-September 2021
- Cultivated county-wide spreadsheet detailing contact information for every active police officer in 48 departments
 - Interacted with various legal actors daily, including the District Attorney, prosecutors, private counsel, police, probation and correctional facility officers, victims, and witnesses
 - Observed courtroom litigation, jury selection, and other proceedings
- PSU College of the Liberal Arts**, Research Assistant, State College, PA + Virtual May-November 2020
- Researched and coded characteristics of 500+ IO/ IGO leaders using PSU library database system and online web searches
 - Summarized archived books and articles for research professor's use
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- Researched and produced informative Instagram posts in relation to Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Reduced Inequality (UN Sustainable Development Goals point 4,5, & 10).
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- Masorti Law Group P.C.**, Legal Assistant State College, PA September 2019-October 2020
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- Penn State English Department**, Undergraduate Honors Teaching Assistant, University Park, PA August 2019-December 2019
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LEADERSHIP

- Penn State Ukrainian Society**, Vice President May 2021-Present
- Plan and execute engaging events for members and surrounding community, including Ukrainian lectures, concerts, seminars, and cultural workshops, most notably "WE ARE for UKRAINE" rally that drew in ~200 people
 - Created and maintain VENMO donation page for war in Ukraine, balancing \$10,000 +
 - Manage Instagram media account and post engaging news and updates
 - Collaborate with executive board and fill in various roles, as there are only 3 board members covering all 8 positions
- Kappa Kappa Gamma Sorority**, President January 2019-January 2021
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