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Honourable Mention

*Pick your Poison: Assessing the Strategic Effectiveness of
Decapitation via Drone Strikes by Looking at the Organizational
Dynamics of Targeted Groups*

Gabriel Boulianne Gobeil

Introduction

As Daniel L. Byman puts it, drones have become “Washington’s weapon of choice.”¹ This paper problematizes the notion that drones are strategically effective, first asking why the United States (US) is now heavily relying on this technology. To answer this question, Byman offers what is at first glance a simple explanation, but which

¹ Daniel L. Byman, “Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington’s Weapon of Choice,” Brookings Institution, June 17, 2013, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/06/17-drones-obama-weapon-choice-us-counterterrorism-byman>. The United States’ primary use of drones is in intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR) missions. This paper focuses on their use in targeted killing operations – that is, when individuals are killed by drones armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles or other laser-guided bombs. While some of these military operations are performed by MQ-1 Predators, most are done by MQ-9 Reapers. The paper does not differentiate between these two types of drone since both are utilized in leadership targeting missions.

depends on problematic assumptions that necessitate clarification: “they work.”² Elaborating on this answer, Byman adds that “by killing key leaders and denying terrorists sanctuaries [...], drones have devastated al Qaeda and associated anti-American militant groups.”³ Byman presupposes that a certain causal mechanism is at play here, namely that decapitation, which involves the removal of an organization’s leader via their killing,⁴ causes the (near) collapse of the targeted groups. While drone strikes have indeed killed high ranking members of various terrorist organizations in several war theatres such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen,⁵ recent scholarship on leadership targeting⁶ and group identities⁷ suggests that decapitation

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Decapitation can also be performed by the capture of a group’s leader. However, this paper refers to decapitations that involve the *killing* of an organization’s leaders. This choice is justified in the next section of the paper, which provides a more in-depth definition of decapitation.

⁵ Drone strikes are performed primarily as part of covert operations. As a result, obtaining accurate and detailed data on individual strikes is difficult and available information is often contested – especially regarding estimates of collateral damage. As David Grondin points out, since drones are objects of security “a great part of the data gathering [...] can only be derivative.” David Grondin, “The study of drones as objects of security: Targeted killing as military strategy,” in *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, edited by Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 192. While this paper chooses to use the Bureau of Investigative Journalism’s (BIJ) data, the reader should note that it too is contested. In fact, Byman is probably accurate in saying that “all the public numbers [about the number and identity of victims] are unreliable.” Daniel Byman, “Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington’s Weapon of Choice,” Brookings Institution, July/August 2013. Accessed February 15, 2016. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/06/17-drones-obama-weapon-choice-us-counterterrorism-byman>. Nonetheless, the BIJ is considered to be a relatively reliable source, having been used in reputable academic work. John Kaag and Sarah E. Kreps, *Drone Warfare* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), pp. 27-28, 31, 42; Sarah E. Kreps, *Drones: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 19-23. This paper uses this data because of the BIJ’s rigorous methodology that cross checks data from several sources including the US government, local governments and media, and academic sources. Although it is admittedly difficult to accurately evaluate the number and the nature of casualties in any given strike, it should be less complicated to determine whether a strike has taken place or not. When bodies have been dispersed, it might be hard to count or identify them, but the presence of a blast site indicates that something must have blown up in the first place.

⁶ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Matt Frankel, “The ABCs of HVT: Key Lessons from High Value Targeting Campaigns Against Insurgents and Terrorists,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34 (2011); Jenna Jordan, “When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation,” *Security Studies* 18 (2009); Jenna Jordan, “Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes,” *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014); John Kaag and Sarah E. Kreps, *Drone Warfare* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), p. 44; Austin Long, “Whack-a-Mole or Coup de Grace?”

may not always be an effective way of countering terrorism.⁸ Notwithstanding that drone strikes have resulted in collateral damage and have also “killed” individuals that were later found to have survived,⁹ is it important to ask whether the successful targeting of terrorist leaders really damages the organization in question. That is, when a drone does kill its intended target and that the target is actually the head of a terrorist group, what are the effects of such leadership decapitation on the group whose leader was killed?

This paper seeks to answer the following research question: when the leadership

Institutionalization and Leadership Targeting in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014); Aaron Mannes, “Testing The Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group’s Activity?,” *The Journal of International Policy Solutions* 9 (2008); Robert A. Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *American Political Science Review* 97, 3 (2003): p. 356.

⁷ Aisha Ahmad, “Going Global: Islamist Competition in Contemporary Civil Wars,” *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016).

⁸ It is important to note that leadership targeting campaigns are not new. In fact, Patrick B. Johnston in “Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns,” *International Security* 36, 4 (2012): p. 58 looks at decapitation attempts that occurred as early as the 1970s. Moreover, former Attorney General Eric Holder, in “Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at Northwestern University School of Law,” Speech, Chicago, IL, March 5, 2012. United States Department of Justice. Accessed February 17, 2016. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-eric-holder-speaks-northwestern-university-school-law.2012>), and former Legal Adviser of the Department of State Harold Koh in “The Obama Administration and International Law.” Speech, Washington, DC, March 25, 2010. United States Department of State. Accessed February 17, 2016.

<http://www.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>.2010), remind us that the US has had recourse to this practice during World War II. However, leadership targeting now occupies a significant part of the broader US counterterrorism campaign (See Johnston, “Does Decapitation work?” p. 76; and Austin Long “Whack-a-Mole or Coup de Grace? Institutionalization and Leadership Targeting in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Security Studies* 23, 3 (2014): p. 471. If popular culture offers any indicator of the prevalence of political practices, then US President Francis Underwood’s comment that “I will not be satisfied by blocking the serpent’s path [...] I wanna cut off its goddamn head” (House of Cards, “Chapter 50,” Season 4, Episode 11, first broadcasted on March 4 by Netflix. Directed by Kari Skogland and written by Tian Jun Gu, 2016) when instructing his national security team on how to defeat the Islamic Caliphate Organization—the popular American drama series’ fictional version of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—certainly points to the topicality of leadership targeting campaigns.

⁹ One of al-Qaeda’s leaders, Ilyas Kashmiri, was targeted by a US drone and declared dead; he was later found to have survived and was then targeted and declared dead a second time, yet surviving once more to finally be killed in a third strike in 2011 (Gregoire Chamayou, *Théorie du drone* (Paris, FR: La Fabrique éditions, 2013), p. 209). If anything, these two failed attempts to kill Kashmiri should call into question the efficacy of the US’ intelligence gathering capabilities leading to drone strikes. Nonetheless, considering the effects that such strikes have when they lead to a *tactical* success is still a worthy academic endeavor—one which this paper seeks to undertake.

of a terrorist group is subject to an external pressure—drone strikes in particular—what are the effects of this decapitation on the targeted group? To answer this question, the paper builds on Aisha Ahmad’s topical work, which looks at the nature of a group’s identity to determine its ability to maintain cohesion or its vulnerability to fragmentation in the face of internal tensions.¹⁰ Extrapolating from her work, this paper makes an original contribution that explains the outcome of decapitation by looking at the identity of the targeted groups and the organizational dynamic associated with that identity. The central argument of this paper is that the outcome of decapitation can be determined by the targeted group’s identity and the organizational dynamic associated with that identity. The paper further argues that following decapitation a group that possesses a *global*¹¹ identity is more likely to retain its cohesion while a group with an *ethnic* or *tribal* identity is more liable to fragment.

This research has at least four relevant theoretical and policy implications. First, it builds on Ahmad’s work to devise a new argument explaining the effects that intense external pressures (decapitation) have on targeted terrorist organizations. This represents a theoretical contribution that other scholars can build on as they study the effect of decapitation across a wider range of terrorist groups and war theatres than those explored below. Second, this paper brings in a new perspective to the ongoing conversation about the effectiveness of leadership targeting practices—a discussion on which the jury is still out. While previous research has looked at some internal characteristics of targeted groups such as their level of institutionalization,¹² their age, size, and type,¹³ or their level of bureaucratization and communal support,¹⁴ this paper shows that the organizational dynamic associated with a group’s identity matters considerably. Third and more importantly, this research represents a first step towards bridging the literature on leadership targeting with recent work on group fragmentation in civil conflicts.¹⁵ Fourth, the main argument of this paper has important

¹⁰ Ahmad, “Going Global.”

¹¹ For the purpose of this paper, a global identity is defined as “a universal Islamic nation that transcends territorial boundaries.” (Aisha Ahmad, “Going Global: Islamist Competition in Contemporary Civil Wars,” *Security Studies* 25, 2 (2016): p. 355).

¹² Long, “Whack-a-Mole.”

¹³ Jordan, “When Heads Roll.”

¹⁴ Jordan, “Attacking the Leader.”

¹⁵ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, “Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions Generate Civil Conflict,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013); Kathleen Gallagher

policy implications. As is argued here, decapitation can lead to two outcomes: retention of group cohesion or fragmentation. While the former outcome does not mitigate the threat posed by the targeted group as it is not destroyed, the latter increases the number of actors the decapitator has to interact with in the war theatre, with each additional actor potentially becoming a 'spoiler' or 'veto player.' In other words, the fragments resulting from decapitation could impede attempts at resolving ethnic conflicts peacefully.¹⁶ In a game of chess, anticipation is key to victory; before moving any of their pieces on the chessboard, prudent chess players must therefore consider potential scenarios of what their adversary could do a few moves before (s)he actually makes those moves. Thus, practitioners ought to be informed of the outcome of decapitation if they are to implement effective counterterrorism *strategies*. Since leadership targeting plays an important role in contemporary counterterrorism campaigns,¹⁷ this paper warns actors that consider making the "decapitation move" on their counterterrorism chessboard: pick your poison.

This paper first, critically assesses the current security studies literature on the topic of leadership targeting and decapitation. Second, it builds on Ahmad's work to spell out its original argument about the determination of the outcome of decapitation,

Cunningham, Kristin M. Bakke, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁶ See Ahmad, "Going Global," pp. 380, 383; David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2006); David E. Cunningham, *Barriers to Peace in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997). As David E. Cunningham argues, "policymakers designing responses to civil wars should look for ways to reduce the number of veto players participating in the conflict" ("Veto Players", p. 891). The conventional wisdom is that a greater number of (veto) players makes it more difficult to solve conflicts peacefully. Consequently, it is crucial for policymakers to be mindful that under certain circumstances decapitation might increase the number of such veto players. Of course, this argument assumes that a group formed out of the fragmentation of the initially targeted group has itself retained a sufficient level of organizational cohesiveness enabling it to act as an effective veto player. While the fragment's effectiveness is not guaranteed, the mere presence of a greater number of players can still undermine conflict resolution. In fact, although they may be ineffective, fragments can still ally with other actors within the conflict theater, which can change the nature of the players and potentially even the balance of power at play in that environment, thereby adding to the conflict's complexity and ultimately making it more difficult to solve.

¹⁷ Byman, "Why Drones Work;" Frankel, "The ABCs of HVT," pp. 17-18; Jordan, "Attacking the Leader," pp. 7-8, 36, 38.

looking at group identities and the connection that these identities have with the group's (in)ability to maintain cohesion. It also introduces the main causal mechanism and the two hypotheses that can be derived from it. Third, it examines two case studies, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) in Yemen. For each case study, it assesses the terrorist group's identity. It then shows how these identities create organizational dynamics that can help explain what happens to the groups when they are subject to leadership targeting. In the concluding section, the paper returns to the academic discussion on leadership targeting, showing how the argument presented here contributes to that conversation by bridging it with the literature on group fragmentation.

Key Definitions and Critical Assessment of the Current Literature on Leadership Targeting

Defining 'Decapitation'

Most of the academic literature on leadership targeting and decapitation tends to focus on the question of effectiveness of such practice. Is decapitation effective? Under what circumstances or conditions is decapitation more likely to work or fail? While these are simple questions, the answers they call for are not so straightforward. Yet, before critically assessing the literature, a few definitions are apropos. First, what is leadership decapitation?¹⁸ The terms *leadership decapitation* and *leadership targeting* are used interchangeably by authors studying the subject.¹⁹ According to Johnston, it involves the "[t]argeting of militant leaders," but this description is somewhat

¹⁸ Reminded by Stephanie Carvin (2012, 531) that there are several—and sometimes divergent—definitions of the term "targeted killing", this paper adopts a definition of decapitation that involves an ambitious objective, namely the permanent incapacitation of the targeted group.

¹⁹ This paper also uses the terms interchangeably. Moreover, Carvin points out that "[n]aming [...] is a political exercise" (Stephanie Carvin, "The Trouble with Targeted Killing," *Security Studies* 21, 3 (2012): p. 544). Thus, this paper avoids making a moral judgment on leadership targeting. This paper refrains from saying whether decapitation is normatively "good" or "bad" aside from stating that it is a practice currently employed by the US and carried out via drone strikes. On how the naming of the objects we study or talk about can significantly change our thinking about them, see Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987).

tautological.²⁰ Matt Frankel refers to this practice as “high-value targeting (HVT) campaign.”²¹ He describes decapitation as the policy of “using military and police forces to kill or capture leaders of insurgent and terrorist groups.”²² Bryan C. Price uses a similar definition, referring to decapitations as “tactics [...] designed to kill or capture the key leader or leaders of a terrorist group.”²³ Although he offers a clearer definition than Johnston’s, Frankel’s is still incomplete, as the practice he describes lacks a purpose, a goal that is contained in Price’s definition, which is to “disrupt the terrorist group’s organizational routine and deter others from assuming power.”²⁴ The action of disrupting, however, suggests a *temporary* interruption. This paper employs Austin Long’s definition because it includes a more ambitious objective than that contained in Price’s definition. In fact, Long explains that decapitation is an “operational technique deployed against insurgent and terrorist groups *that seeks to destroy or cripple the organization* [emphasis added] by targeting senior and mid-level leadership.”²⁵ In other words, decapitation is a practice in which an actor seeks to disable the high- or mid-level ranking officials of a group with the objective of *permanently* incapacitating the group as a whole.²⁶ As Audrey Kurth Cronin suggests, it might not be feasible to put an end to terrorism in general, but destroying a particular terrorist group is an achievable

²⁰ Patrick B. Johnston, “Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns,” *International Security* 36, no. 4 (2012): p. 47.

²¹ Frankel, “The ABCs of HVT”, p. 17.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bryan C. Price, “Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism,” *International Security* 36, no. 4 (2012): p. 9.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁵ Long, “Whack-a-Mole,” p. 472.

²⁶ According to this definition, the killing of US President John F. Kennedy would constitute a case of decapitation only if the purpose of this action was to incapacitate the US *as a whole*, which is unlikely to have been Lee Harvey Oswald’s intention. As will be explained below, had it been the goal of the assassin to disable the US, this instance would only have represented a tactical success and not a strategic success since Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson immediately replaced Kennedy as President and the US was able to continue conducting its business as usual. This is not meant to suggest that Kennedy’s assassination did not have *any* effect on the US. Of course, it did. However, the apparatus of the US government did not stop from functioning simply as a result of his death.

aim.²⁷ As this paper employs the term, decapitation seeks to fulfill the latter, realistic, yet still challenging objective.

Although decapitation does not require the target to be killed, according to the above definitions, the capture of terrorist leaders occurs less frequently. Despite the fact that the US' "preference is always to detain, interrogate, and prosecute" rather than kill terrorists,²⁸ Byman explains that more often than not capturing an enemy in belligerent territory is not a cost-efficient option, and killing the foe becomes the most appealing alternative.²⁹ Capture entails detention and the political costs of detention are simply too high, raising difficult legal questions about where a detainee should be sent and under which jurisdiction (s)he should be tried.³⁰ To answer Carvin's call for definitional clarity, it is worth specifying that this paper refers to decapitation as the *killing* as opposed to the *capture* of the targeted leader(s).³¹ Moreover, to date, drones, which are the focus of this paper, cannot capture, but only kill their target.

Defining 'Effectiveness'

Having defined decapitation as a practice involving a definite objective, this paper can return to the question of effectiveness, which is at the centre of the discussion on leadership targeting. Yet, before determining whether this practice is effective, it is essential to know what is meant by 'effectiveness' in the context of leadership targeting. On the *tactical* front, academics and practitioners alike agree that decapitation is effective, as drone strikes have killed heads of terrorist organizations or high value

²⁷ Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): pp. 7, 48.

²⁸ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University," speech, Washington, DC, May 23, 2013, White House, last accessed February 17, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

²⁹ Byman, "Why Drones Work"; see also Sarah E. Kreps, *Drones: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 26.

For an assessment of the discussions that took place within the top security circles of the Obama administration regarding his broader counterterrorism campaign and the decision to kill or capture terrorist targets more specifically, see Daniel Klaidman, *Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

³⁰ Byman, "Why Drones Work"; Kreps, *Drones: What Everyone Needs to Know*, p. 27.

³¹ Stephanie Carvin, "The Trouble with Targeted Killing," *Security Studies* 21, no. 3 (2012): pp. 545-546.

targets.³² However, the more interesting and much more important debate about leadership targeting campaigns is over their *strategic* effectiveness.³³ This paper therefore defines effectiveness in terms of the broader strategy and goal of countering a given terrorist organization or fragments thereof. Decapitation is merely a means of achieving this end. Following on Long's definition, this paper considers a leadership targeting campaign to have been effective when it has resulted in the targeted group's long-term inability to perform its operations—without causing the group to splinter since fragments of the targeted group could still pose a threat to the decapitator. A strategic as opposed to a tactical emphasis on the notion of effectiveness seems to be compatible with the US' objective to “destroy ISIL *and* [emphasis added] any other organization that tries to harm us.”³⁴ When a decapitation results in the fragmentation of the targeted group into two or more groups that are still able to operate and carry out attacks, this paper considers this instance as one where decapitation has been ineffective.

Critical Review of the Decapitation Literature

According to Max Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, decapitations carried out via drone strikes augment the chances that the targeted group will have recourse to violence

³² Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “Get the data: Drone wars,” last accessed March 15, 2016, 2016a, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>; Daniel L. Byman, “Do Targeted Killings Work?,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (2006); Byman, “Why Drones Work”; Grégoire Chamayou, *Théorie du drone* (Paris, FR: La Fabrique éditions, 2013), p. 98; Frankel, “The ABCs of HVT,” p. 18; Eric Holder, “Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at Northwestern University School of Law,” speech, Chicago, IL, March 5, 2012, United States Department of Justice, last accessed February 17, 2016, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-eric-holder-speaks-northwestern-university-school-law>; Jordan, “Attacking the Leader,” p. 38; Kaag and Kreps, *Drone Warfare*, pp. 14, 44; Kreps, *Drones: What Everyone Needs to Know*, pp. 27-28; Obama, “Remarks by the President”; Avery Plaw, “Terminating Terror: The Legality, Ethics and Effectiveness of Targeting Terrorists,” *Theoria* 54, no. 114 (2007): p. 1.

³³ Frankel, “The ABCs of HVT,” p. 18; Kaag and Kreps, *Drone Warfare*, p. 44.

³⁴ Barack Obama, “President Obama Addresses the Nation on Keeping the American People Safe,” speech, Washington, DC, December 6, 2015, White House, last accessed February 16, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/12/05/president-obama-addresses-nation-keeping-american-people-safe>.

against civilians.³⁵ This outcome is explained by the fact that when a leader is taken out by a drone, “tactical decisions are delegated to lower-level members with stronger incentives to harm civilians.”³⁶ While Abrahms and Potter recognize that this outcome is not ideal given that drone strikes aggravate the situation on the ground by pushing leaderless groups to use violence indiscriminately against civilians, they suggest that it might actually be detrimental to the group in the long term since doing so can alienate the group from the civilian population on which it relies for support.³⁷ This argument would be corroborated by Jordan who claims that one of the two key factors contributing to a terrorist groups’ ability to remain sturdy when its leadership is targeted is the level of “communal support” it enjoys.³⁸ Should a group lose its communal support, leadership targeting is more likely to be effective. The targeted group’s level of bureaucratization is the second element that, according to her, influences the targeted group’s resilience to decapitations. At the core of her argument lies a simple logic; high levels of both bureaucratization and communal support are indicative that the leaders of the group are less important figures.³⁹ Hence, decapitation is less likely to incapacitate the group.

Jordan’s logic is problematic for at least two reasons. First, she contends that communal support comes with the ability to recruit, which leads to the reviving of the targeted group.⁴⁰ But how does one distinguish between the group’s ability to gain recruits because it enjoys communal support and the group’s ability to gain communal support because it attracts recruits? Jordan does not say. Not only does her claim create a problem of endogeneity, it is also tautological. Second, her argument falls apart if the group’s enjoyment of communal support stems from the presence of a highly charismatic leader who has the ability to mobilize many individuals to support the group’s cause.

³⁵ Max Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, “Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics,” *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015).

³⁶ Abrahms and Potter, “Explaining Terrorism,” p. 312, 315-317. Considering terrorism as a principal-agent problem, Abrahms and Potter woffer several reasons why lower ranking militants are more likely than their higher-ranking counterparts to target civilians.

³⁷ Abrahms and Potter, “Explaining Terrorism,” p. 331.

³⁸ Jordan, “Attacking the Leader,” p. 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

In her earlier work, Jordan gives a different explanation for the resilience of targeted groups, arguing that “[a] group’s age, size, and type are all important predictors of when decapitation is likely to be effective.”⁴¹ She maintains that the first two factors are inversely associated with the decapitation’s ability to yield the organization’s collapse. That is, the older and the larger the group, the less likely the effectiveness of leadership targeting. Jordan finds that religious groups are more resilient than their ideological equivalents.⁴² Like Jordan, Price identifies age as a determinant of effectiveness, finding that terrorist groups who incur decapitation at an earlier age are more likely to be negatively affected by it.⁴³ However, unlike Jordan, Price argues that decapitation is in general effective against terrorist groups because of their violent, clandestine, and value-based nature. He maintains that these three characteristics make it more difficult for groups who suffered a loss of one of their leaders to replace it. The main issue with Price’s argument stems from his two prerequisites for the effectiveness of decapitation. He claims that for decapitation to be effective, the targeted leaders must be important and they must also be difficult to replace, subsequently showing why the violent, clandestine, and value-based nature of terrorist groups makes them meet those two criteria.⁴⁴ However, these scope conditions are so narrow that it should come as no surprise that he finds decapitation to be effective.

Responding to Jordan’s and Price’s work, Long argues that the age of a group simply acts as a substitute for its level of institutionalization, which he views as the foremost determinant of the outcome of leadership targeting.⁴⁵ As Long posits, “[t]here is nothing inherent in size or age that immunizes organizations.”⁴⁶ Offering a more compelling explanation of organizational resilience, Long maintains that the level of institutionalization of a targeted group will determine its ability to withstand decapitation. His causal mechanism unfolds in the following fashion: if there is a decapitation, then the level of institutionalization of the targeted group will determine

⁴¹ Jordan, “When Heads Roll,” p. 722.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 722-723.

⁴³ Price, “Targeting Top Terrorists,” p. 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁵ Long, “Whack-a-Mole.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 474.

the outcome of the decapitation. Variation on his independent variable is binary, going from poorly to well-institutionalized. Long uses three indicators to measure institutionalization, looking at the presence of “hierarchy,” “functional specialization,” and “bureaucratic processes and standard operating procedures.”⁴⁷ When present, these elements facilitate the replacement of a killed leader.⁴⁸ Also binary, his dependent variable ranges between loss and retention of cohesion. Long argues that under the pressure of decapitation, well-institutionalized groups will maintain cohesion while poorly institutionalized ones will lose it.

The above does not represent a comprehensive critical assessment of the literature on leadership targeting, but should nonetheless be sufficient to call the reader’s attention to one key aspect that the works appraised have in common. In an attempt at determining whether decapitation is effective or not, the authors surveyed all look at *internal* features of the groups that are subject to leadership targeting campaigns. This is sound, for before one can hope to counter terrorism one must first understand what needs to be countered. The works assessed above, however, omit to devote serious attention to a terrorist group’s identity—beyond simply stating, as Jordan does, that a group is either religious or ideological for instance⁴⁹—and the organizational dynamics associated with its identity. More precisely, where does a group’s identity come from? How does identity shape the internal dynamics of the group and contribute to its ability to withstand decapitation or, alternatively, lead to its fragmentation? The following section builds on Ahmad’s work on group identity and devises an original argument that can help us answer these questions, which are left unanswered by current work on leadership targeting. This section also generates two testable hypotheses.

Why identities matter: Argument and hypotheses

It is important to note that the scope of Ahmad’s study is limited to “Sunni Islamic” terrorist groups.⁵⁰ Thus, it is prudent to refrain from making generalizations

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 477-478.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 478.

⁴⁹ Jordan, “When Heads Roll.”

⁵⁰ Ahmad, “Going Global,” p. 357.

beyond such groups.⁵¹ According to Ahmad, the way in which a terrorist group's identity is formed can tell us a great deal about the group's capacity to resist internal pressures within the competitive environment that characterizes civil wars. Driving her research is the following question: "what effect do local versus global identities have on an insurgent group's competitiveness."⁵² Her argument is twofold, firstly proposing that groups whose identity is "global" are set up in such a way that makes them more efficient at mobilizing individuals to join their cause than their "tribal" or "ethnic" counterparts.⁵³ She explains this difference as being due to the fact that unlike the latter type of group, the former's appeal is not limited to a pool of conscripts with a predetermined and exclusive ethnicity.⁵⁴

In the second part of her argument, Ahmad adds that global Islamic groups possess another crucial advantage over their tribal and ethnic equivalents, being able to prevent internal fragmentation and thus maintain a higher level of group cohesion.⁵⁵ Two reasons explain this. The first has to do with their ability to recruit on a larger scale, which was mentioned above. Second, by attempting to create a genuinely "global" identity, global Islamic groups—such as Al-Shabaab in Somalia—organize themselves in a way that eliminates any associations to tribal or ethnic lineage by shuffling leaders within the group. These leaders do not lead a subgroup belonging to their ethnic identity, resulting in the global group's overall ability to prevent factional conflicts that could ultimately lead to fragmentation.⁵⁶ Lacking this organizing principle that is precisely associated with the idea of a global identity, Ahmad argues that tribal and ethnic groups are more likely to fragment.⁵⁷ As she explains, this global identity is manifested more than simply through the hierarchical arrangement of the group leaders. To be sure, she claims that

[w]hile local Islamists understandably rely on ethnicity and tribe for recruitment and organization, the global Islamist actively rejects and

⁵¹ See Carvin, "The Trouble with Targeted Killing," p. 553.

⁵² Ahmad, "Going Global," p. 354.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 355, 361.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 355.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 371, 374.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 355.

undermines these seemingly valuable sources of identity. Rather than seeking legitimacy and solidarity from within traditional networks of power, the global Islamist constructs identity and authority through a fundamentally ahistorical and nostalgic abstract conception of an imagined global *ummah* [original emphasis]. These are modern ideas that lack practical roots in local communities and even do violence to traditional systems of order and organization. Yet they capitalize on powerful social frames that have deep emotional and psychological meaning across ethnic and tribal divisions.⁵⁸

This means that global Islamism gains its power from the identity of its organization, not from (charismatic) leaders who—in ethnic or tribal groups—derive their power from local history and symbols. Because of the channel through which their organizations generate their power, leaders of global Islamic groups are therefore less likely to be important within their respective group. Leaders’ salience is further reduced because of their shuffling within the global group.

Going back to Price whose two preconditions for the effectiveness of decapitation included that a leader be both salient and difficult to replace after having been killed, one can surmise that the internal features of a global Islamic group, the result of its desire to create a global identity, increase the likelihood that the organization will endure the external pressure being exerted on it. Although this paper criticized Price for what it argued were too circumscribed scope criteria, he nonetheless identifies two important elements about leaders that can determine a group’s ability to withstand leadership targeting. Where this paper makes an important contribution, however, is that it shows how the identity of a group—global or ethnic/tribal—makes a leader matter or not in the first place.

While it looked at competition within terrorist groups, representing *internal* pressure, Ahmad’s study leaves us with a call for additional research to look at the effects identity would have on a group’s resilience when it is subjected to *external* pressure.⁵⁹ As Ahmad puts it, “intimate knowledge of the diverse ideological and organizational nature of rival Islamist groups is necessary for the development of

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 364-365.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 383.

effective policy.”⁶⁰ The existing literature on decapitation has examined certain characteristics of targeted group to determine how effective the practice is, but it has not looked at the group’s identity and the organizational dynamic that is engendered by such identity. Using leadership targeting as an instance of such external pressure, this is what the remainder of this paper proposes to do. The paper argues that when a terrorist organization incurs leadership targeting the nature of its identity will help determine the outcome of the decapitation. Two hypotheses logically arise from this expectation, which are formulated as follow:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *If a group whose identity is ethnic or tribal undergoes decapitation, then the group is more likely to fragment into two (or more) smaller groups.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *If a group whose identity is global undergoes decapitation, then the group is more likely to withstand the pressure and retain cohesion.*

The identity of the group can either take the value “global” or “ethnic/tribal” although Ahmad notes that these discrete categories are not always easy to distinguish; groups are instead hybrids of the two.⁶¹ The empirical section of this paper will therefore look at whether a group is more closely associated with one type of identity than the other rather than trying to identify a pure type. The outcome of leadership targeting can take two values, namely ‘cohesion’ or ‘fragmentation.’ Adopting Ahmad’s definitions of these two phenomena, this paper considers them to be representing “a unified organizational structure governing a single identified group [... and] the formal splitting of a single organizational structure into two or more distinct groups, each with its own identity, agenda, and leadership,” respectively.⁶² Finally, since this paper looks exclusively at cases of leadership targeting, the presence of decapitation represents the “antecedent condition”⁶³ without which the causal relationship between the group’s identity and the outcome of decapitation could not take place.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 384.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 356.

⁶² Ibid., p. 357.

⁶³ Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 9-11.

Case study 1: al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)

AQI's global identity

What kind of groups are al Qaeda and its Iraqi branch, namely AQI? Ty McCormick traces the inception of al Qaeda to Pakistan where, in August 1988, Osama Bin Laden was motivated by the goal of “global jihad.”⁶⁴ It is not until 2004 that AQI was formed after Iraq-based terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi expressed his support for the organization created in 1988.⁶⁵ In 2013, AQI became ISIL.⁶⁶ In the midst of the operations it carried in Iraq in 2014, ISIL substituted Iraqi flags for its own.⁶⁷ This brief historical survey of al Qaeda and AQI indicates that these organizations adopt a global identity, for they do not gain their support in a given locality that would be associated with an exclusive ethnic or tribal group. Moreover, by renouncing to keep the Iraqi flag, ISIL demonstrates that even though it is an organization that was initially formed in Iraq under the name of AQI it does not espouse the identity that accompanies its Iraqi lineage. It is important to note that AQI's founder, al-Zarqawi, was born in Jordan, further indicating that AQI's identity is not ethnic or tribal.⁶⁸ Unlike AQI, a group whose identity stems from ethnic or tribal lineage would have been unlikely to accept a foreigner as its leader or its founder. While AQI's founder is from Jordan and, operating in Iraq, therefore does not control a group that belongs to his ethnic or tribal lineage, it is not clear whether this was intentionally designed by the al Qaeda and AQI leadership at a more systematic level. At least one other foreign leader—Ayman al-Zawahiri who was born and educated in Egypt—occupies a high-ranking position within al Qaeda.⁶⁹ Yet, one cannot conclude merely from these two examples that al Qaeda and AQI leadership is deliberately constituted of foreigners so as to form a global identity.

⁶⁴ Ty McCormick, “Al Qaeda Core,” *Foreign Policy* 205 (2014): p. 26.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Brookshire, “Keeping an Eye on al-Qaeda in Iraq,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 2 (2009): p. 62.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

According to Marc Lynch, al Qaeda “is a global organization with a genuinely transnational scope and a universalizing mission.”⁷⁰ A core objective of al Qaeda is to create an Islamic state or a caliphate.⁷¹ Moreover, al Qaeda seeks to “[spread] Islamic identity,”⁷² which suggests that it does not seek any sort of ethnic or tribal purity within its ranks, for “spreading” implies that it is willing to accept members that were not necessarily associated to it by nature of belonging to a predetermined (local) group. Lynch adds that “[a]l Qaeda rejects the very principle of states [...] see[ing] itself as [...] de-territorialized.”⁷³ This further suggests that al Qaeda is a global group and not an ethnic or tribal one, for it does not consider itself to be connected to a given territory, which entails that it does not attach importance to tribal identities that would be connected to a particular ancestral territory. Furthermore, in 2006, AQI sought to “impose its hegemony over the disparate and fragmented Iraqi insurgency,”⁷⁴ again indicating the group’s inclination to form a united whole, yet potentially constituted of disparate ethnic and tribal members—an objective a group seeking to form a local group would not have done. AQI’s endeavor to establish a hegemony also calls attention to the group’s top-down organization. As Ahmad explains, where local groups get their power from their ethnic and tribal lineages, that of global groups stems from the global identity they devise for themselves. As noted above, a key characteristic (and advantage) of global groups is their ability to recruit beyond ethnic and tribal lines. Thus, by its attempt to take followers away from the Muslim Brotherhood,⁷⁵ a group that does not share its goal of creating a caliphate, al Qaeda further demonstrates its global nature.

⁷⁰ Marc Lynch, “Islam Divided Between Salafi-jihad and the Ikhwan,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33 (2010): p. 468.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 472.

⁷³ Lynch, “Islam Divided Between Salafi-jihad and the Ikhwan,” p. 472. AQI’s self-perception as a de-territorialized group that simultaneously wants to create a caliphate (which would inevitably involve a given territory on which to be built) may seem contradictory. However, AQI should be understood as being de-territorialized in the sense that its desire to establish a caliphate would challenge *existing* state boundaries, but would nonetheless settle on a new territory that would represent AQI’s caliphate. In other words, AQI’s rejection of territoriality is opposing the modern state system that includes the current territory of Iraq and other states recognized by the international community and conceptualized through the Westphalian state system.

⁷⁴ Lynch, “Islam Divided Between Salafi-jihad and the Ikhwan,” p. 476.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

Jonathan Brookshire notes that “AQI’s struggle in Iraq has brought probably thousands of *foreign* [emphasis added] fighters from across the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe to participate in jihad,”⁷⁶ which once again points to the organization’s global identity. The transnational quality of AQI operations, its lack of an attachment to a particular territory currently recognized by the international community, and its quest for a global jihad all indicate that it is more closely associated with a global identity than with an ethnic or tribal one. However, no evidence seems to show that it is organized in a way akin to Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which intentionally shifts its leaders around the organization to avoid any associations with ethnic and tribal links. Yet, that might be due to a reliance on secondary data, which limits the above investigation from highlighting the intricate organizational dynamics associated with AQI’s global identity. Access to primary data might help determine whether AQI does indeed share Al-Shabaab’s organizational model or if this feature is peculiar to the Somali-based organization. That said, while not necessarily being a pure type, AQI’s identity is significantly closer to global than ethnic or tribal. Following on H2, this paper therefore expects the outcome of leadership targeting on AQI to be the preservation of the group’s cohesion.

AQI’s ability to withstand decapitation and retain group cohesion

In the summer of 2006, AQI incurred the highest decapitation possible, as the US carried out an air strike⁷⁷ that stripped off the organization’s founder, al-Zarqawi.⁷⁸ The decapitated AQI did not remain leaderless for very long since Abu Ayyub al-Masri took al-Zarqawi’s seat shortly after his death.⁷⁹ However, al-Masri became the target of another decapitation campaign by the US who succeeded in killing him in 2010.⁸⁰ Several other members of AQI leadership have been the target of successful

⁷⁶ Brookshire, “Keeping an Eye on al-Qaeda in Iraq,” p. 62.

⁷⁷ Whether the strike that took out al-Zarqawi was from a manned or unmanned plane has not been made public.

⁷⁸ Brian Fishman, “After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq,” *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2006): p. 19.

⁷⁹ Fishman, “After Zarqawi,” p. 19; Richard M. Medina, “Social Network Analysis: A case study of the Islamist terrorist network,” *Security Journal* 27, no. 1 (2012): p. 110.

⁸⁰ Medina, “Social Network Analysis,” p. 112.

decapitation efforts by the US.⁸¹ Barack Obama stated that with the use of drones the overall counterterrorism campaign had “relentlessly targeted al Qaeda’s leadership.”⁸² Sarah E. Kreps also notes that US “drones have carried out a number of high-profile attacks” in Iraq and Syria,⁸³ evidencing the presence of a sustained decapitation effort and, by association, the antecedent condition necessary for the causal mechanism to take place.

While these efforts weakened AQI, the terrorist group withstood the loss of many of its top members.⁸⁴ Moreover, with the help of a social network analysis, Richard M. Medina shows that AQI’s loss of leadership—al-Zarqawi’s death more particularly—was met with organizational resilience.⁸⁵ As McCormick pointed out, AQI became ISIL in 2013. However, aside from giving AQI a different name this relabelling did not reflect a change in the organizational dynamics of the terrorist group. In fact, Anthony N. Celso argues that the organization that succeeded AQI—the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), which later became ISIL—still embraces AQI’s original goal to establish a caliphate.⁸⁶ Although AQI has experienced changes in its name and leadership, Celso explains that “[m]any Iraq jihad veterans remain loyal to [al-]Zarqawi’s worldview.”⁸⁷ AQI’s metamorphosis into ISI and then ISIL can suggest that al-Zarqawi’s original organization has either been decimated or has fragmented into new organizations, but this conclusion would be incorrect. While the label of AQI no longer exists, the groups that succeeded it are not fragments thereof. To be sure, Celso asserts that “[r]ecent events have rejuvenated both [al-]Zarqawi’s network and his sectarian-takfiri strategy.”⁸⁸ Despite the different label it gives itself, this strongly indicates that AQI retained cohesion following the decapitation strikes it incurred. The evidence presented above supports H2.

⁸¹ Anthony N. Celso, “Zarqawi’s Legacy: Al Qaeda’s ISIS “Renegade”,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2015): p. 26.

⁸² Obama, “Remarks by the President.”

⁸³ Kreps, *Drones: What Everyone Needs to Know*, p. 19.

⁸⁴ Celso, “Zarqawi’s Legacy,” p. 26.

⁸⁵ Medina, “Social Network Analysis,” p. 112.

⁸⁶ Celso, “Zarqawi’s Legacy,” pp. 21-22.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Case study 2: Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) in Yemen

AAS' ethnic/tribal identity

According to the US State Department, AAS is considered to be a terrorist organization that operates under the larger umbrella of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).⁸⁹ McCormick traces the inception of the Yemeni branch of AQAP to 2006, following the spectacular escape of “[t]wenty-three al Qaeda suspects [...] from a Yemeni prison.”⁹⁰ The BIJ claims that AAS is a *nom de guerre* that AQAP gave itself “after it took control of a swathe of southern Yemen in 2011.”⁹¹ Robin Simcox calls the Yemeni organization “AQAP’s insurgent wing.”⁹² Moreover, Katerina Dalacoura refers to AAS as a rebranding of al Qaeda elements operating in Yemen.⁹³ For her part, Eva Sohlman views AAS and AQAP as allied, distinct terrorist groups.⁹⁴ While both AAS and AQAP operate in Yemen and share similar tactics, important differences exist between the groups.⁹⁵ To be sure, “[t]he most notable [dividing line] is that Ansar al-Sharia is an anti-regime *tribal* [emphasis added] movement focused on the near enemy of the Yemeni government.”⁹⁶ Leila Hudson et al. explain that AAS’ main objective is not to establish an Islamic caliphate with a global reach, as is the case for AQI, but is instead concentrated on a more local ambition, namely the opposition of the Yemeni

⁸⁹ Robin Simcox, “Ansar al-Sharia and Governance in Southern Yemen,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 14 (2013): p. 60.

⁹⁰ McCormick, “Al Qaeda Core,” p. 26.

⁹¹ Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “US strikes in Yemen, 2002 to present,” last accessed March 13, 2016, 2016b,

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11b1hEYJ_omI8lSe33izwS2a2lbiygs0hTp2Al_Kz5KQ/edit#gid=977256262.

⁹² Robin Simcox, “AQAP’s Ideological Battles at Home and Abroad,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 18 (2015): p. 21.

⁹³ Katerina Dalacoura, “The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East,” *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 1 (2013): p. 82.

⁹⁴ Eva Sohlman, “Al Qaeda in Yemen Pushed Back, but Terrorism Threat Remains Strong,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 34, no. 5 (2012): p. 249.

⁹⁵ Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens, and David J. Callen, “Drone Warfare in Yemen: Fostering Emirates through Counterterrorism?,” *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 3 (2012): pp. 151-152.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

government, which it aspires to replace.⁹⁷ Hudson et al. add that “Ansar-type groups [...] are less about fighting and more about running daily life in the society that harbors the hard-core fighters.”⁹⁸ Simcox explains that AAS’ principal activities have been to provide the population of Ja’ar—a locality in the southern region of Yemen—with basic services such as water and electricity.⁹⁹ He draws on various interviews of local residents of Ja’ar who highlight the fact that AAS’ provided for the town’s daily and local needs—something the official government had failed to do.¹⁰⁰ AAS’ daily activities call attention to the group’s local identity. To be sure, the International Crisis Group designates AAS as a “parallel group” of AQAP that focuses solely on domestic issues and whose supports stems from within the local population, which the group seeks to serve.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, as the non-governmental organization puts it, “AAS’s popularity was clearly based on its comparatively efficient governance more than on its ideology.”¹⁰² That AAS both provides for local residents and derives supports from that same base further underscores the group’s tribal identity. In sum, accounts of AAS’ daily enterprise are in sharp contrast with those of groups like AQI whose objective and the identity associated with it has a clear global component.

AAS’ primary objective of resisting the Yemeni government and the group’s locally-focused operations of providing basic services further suggests that it possesses a local identity. Moreover, AAS’ recruitment practices also point to the group’s local identity. In fact, AAS’ recruitment efforts have been assisted by tribal leaders who have actually brought fighters to the group.¹⁰³ The fact that AAS’ recruitment is generally conducted more locally might not entirely be the result of the group’s desire to give

⁹⁷ Hudson et al., “Drone Warfare in Yemen,” p. 152. According to the Central Intelligence Agency’s (2016) World Factbook, “an estimated 65% [of the Yemeni population] are Sunni and 35% are Shia” (2016). It is worth noting that former President Ali Abdallah Saleh—who was at the head of the Yemeni government between 1990 and 2012—is a Shia (CNN 2016). Saleh thus represented a minority of the population with a different religious identity than AAS who is Sunni.

⁹⁸ Hudson et al., “Drone Warfare in Yemen,” p. 152.

⁹⁹ Simcox, “Ansar al-Sharia and Governance,” p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

¹⁰¹ International Crisis Group, *Yemen’s al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*, Middle East Report 174, last accessed August 3, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Simcox, “Ansar al-Sharia and Governance in Southern Yemen,” p. 65.

itself an ethnic or tribal identity, which would characterize a pure type ethnic/tribal organizational dynamic in Ahmad's work. Other factors may explain AAS' locally-oriented mobilization. As Simcox notes, the sociopolitical circumstances in Yemen have allowed AAS to recruit locally because the level of disillusionment is quite high among youth who also represent the largest demographic group in the country.¹⁰⁴ AAS does not seem to embrace a purely ethnic or tribal identity, for its membership includes "a murky mix of al-Qaeda militants and young local recruits."¹⁰⁵ Yet, the International Crisis Group also emphasizes that AAS does not embrace AQAP's global objectives and is exclusively concerned with local matters.¹⁰⁶ Also linking AAS to AQAP, Jim Lobe explains that the former group, which he describes as being constituted of "militants and tribal militias," operates in the southern region of Yemen.¹⁰⁷ The fact that AAS is operating in a geographically limited location and is composed of *tribal* fighters once again points to the organization's local character. In sum, the above literature strongly suggests that AAS is more closely associated with an ethnic or tribal identity—even though its origin can be traced back to AQAP whose respective identity has a more global component. Since AAS' group identity is ethnic/tribal, this paper expects the outcome of leadership targeting to result in the fragmentation of the group, as surmised by H1.

AAS' fragmentation

Yemen has been one of the key theatres of the US counterterrorism campaign and drone program. John Kaag and Sarah E. Kreps note that although other countries such as Pakistan have been the theatre of a greater "total number of strikes," the use of weaponized drones has been on the rise in Yemen.¹⁰⁸ In fact, Yemen is still a very active battlefield of the US counterterrorism efforts, with as many as 8 to 10 "[c]onfirmed drone strikes" and another 78 recorded attacks conducted in 2017 alone, according to

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰⁵ International Crisis Group quoted in Dalacoura, "The Arab Uprisings Two Years On," p. 82.

¹⁰⁶ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's al-Qaeda*.

¹⁰⁷ Jim Lobe, "U.S. Escalating Drone War in Yemen," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2012): p. 32.

¹⁰⁸ Kaag and Kreps, *Drone Warfare*, pp. 28-29.

the BIJ.¹⁰⁹ This places Yemen as one of the most struck countries by the US drone war. According to the BIJ, the US deployment of drones in Yemen has been primarily aimed at AQAP, a branch of which gave itself the label of AAS in 2011 as mentioned above. It is important to note that while the first strike in Yemen was taken in 2002, most drone strikes that took place on Yemeni territory were performed from 2012 onwards.¹¹⁰ Thus, the large majority of strikes were conducted only after a branch of AQAP became AAS. Kreps claims that as many as 115 strikes were taken in Yemen in 2011 alone.¹¹¹

Since most data about the US counterterrorism efforts is classified and US officials have not been forthcoming with information pertaining to drone strikes, determining the exact number of strikes that took place in Yemen and precisely who was targeted—aside from a few notable exceptions like the strike that killed Anwar Al-Awlaki¹¹²—becomes unfeasible. In fact, aside from the *The Middle East Journal's* Chronology series, the existing literature offers little information about successful decapitation strikes against AAS. One of the US drone strikes is reported to have killed five AAS members on October 4, 2012.¹¹³ Another strike is believed to have killed AAS leader Nabil al-Dhahab on November 5, 2014.¹¹⁴ More generally, additional strikes were also reported to have terminated several members of AQAP leadership.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Obama's statement about "[his] administration's relentless pursuit of al Qaeda's leadership"¹¹⁶ in his National Defense University speech where he (in)famously disclosed the US' ongoing use of military drones in places which include Yemen *combined with* the above numbers about strikes taken in Yemen strongly indicate the presence of a decapitation campaign. This information indicates that external pressure

¹⁰⁹ Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Yemen: Reported US covert actions 2017," last accessed May 13, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-2017#strike-logs>.

¹¹⁰ Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "US strikes in Yemen, 2002 to present"; Kaag and Kreps, *Drone Warfare*, p. 28.

¹¹¹ Kreps, *Drones: What Everyone Needs to Know*, p. 19.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹¹³ "Chronology: July 16, 2012 – October 15, 2012," *The Middle East Journal* 67, no. 1 (2013): pp. 130-131.

¹¹⁴ "Chronology: October 16, 2014 – January 15, 2015," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (2015b): p. 305.

¹¹⁵ "Chronology: April 16, 2015 – July 15, 2015," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (2015a): p. 623;

"Chronology: October 16, 2014 – January 15, 2015," p. 305.

¹¹⁶ Obama, "Remarks by the President."

was exerted on AAS, thus showing that the antecedent condition is met. Furthermore, it indicates US leadership targeting in Yemen was tactically successful.

The question is, however, have these decapitations have led to the fragmentation of the groups. Here, the paper is faced with the methodological barrier identified by Grondin.¹¹⁷ The clandestine nature of the activities performed by terrorist organizations such as AAS as well as the secrecy around the operations seeking to counter these organizations such as the US use of drones against AAS make it very difficult to determine the effects that leadership targeting has had on the targeted organizations. The methodological limitations of this reliance on secondary data is likely accentuated by the fact that AAS is a group with an ethnic/tribal identity. In fact, this paper hypothesizes that given AAS' geographically restrained operations in comparison with the global reach associated with AQI's objective to create a caliphate, the former organization's impact has not been as significant as that of the latter, which would be proportionately correlated with the amount of academic research conducted on each group. In other words, less has been written on AAS since it operates exclusively in remote areas of Yemen while AQI's objectives and reach are wider and have therefore been researched more extensively.¹¹⁸ Access to primary data akin to the one used in Ahmad's research would help circumvent this obstacle without necessarily eliminating it. In light of this challenge, this paper follows Grondin's recommendation and draws "derivative"¹¹⁹ conclusions about the outcome of decapitation on AAS, which it argues still offers some support to H1.

In fact, Obama stated that despite the US counterterrorism efforts in places like Yemen, "what we've seen is the emergence of various al Qaeda affiliates."¹²⁰ This suggests that, while leadership targeting may have weakened al Qaeda's core, it led to its fragmentation. This would explain the President's claim that "the threat today is

¹¹⁷ David Grondin, "The study of drones as objects of security: Targeted killing as military strategy," in *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 192.

¹¹⁸ The same logic applies to AQI, which has been more widely researched than AAS. This is likely due to the fact that AQI has a global scope. Moreover, a great deal of literature has been written about the Islamic State, which once again has a global reach, as evidenced by its claiming of several attacks in Western countries in recent years.

¹¹⁹ Grondin, "The study of drones as objects of security," p. 192.

¹²⁰ Obama, "Remarks by the President."

more *diffuse* [emphasis added].”¹²¹ Moreover, AAS has been regarded as an “al-Qa’ida splinter group.”¹²² Furthermore, the BIJ claims that “[AAS] was a re-branding exercise by AQAP, an attempt to move away from the name al Qaeda [sic] which had been tainted by the bloodlust of [AQI] and the extreme sectarian violence it unleashed across Iraq in 2006 and 2007.”¹²³ This evidence points to AAS’—more importantly, AQAP’s—desire to stay at a distance from the core of al Qaeda. It is therefore possible that strikes targeting AQAP’s leadership have led to the formation of AAS via fragmentation. This derivative conclusion, which lends support to H1, is plausible since drone strikes have been recorded in Yemen starting in 2002, indicating that AQAP—a group that preceded and yielded AAS and which also operates within Yemen, although on a larger territory—was very likely subjected to external pressures (H1’s antecedent condition). Combining this with the above quote from the BIJ indicating that AQAP was already attempting to develop an identity of its own, this paper therefore proposes that the emergence of AAS is derivatively accounted for by the fragmentation of an AQAP that was possessing a proto-tribal identity and on which an external pressure was exerted. Admittedly, additional research would have to look more thoroughly at the organizational dynamics and identity of AQAP to ascertain more convincingly that the decapitation of AQAP led to its fragmentation and that this resulted because AQAP already possessed a tribal or ethnic identity.

Conclusion

Leadership targeting operations, which involve the removal of an organization’s leader via their killing, are practices that have been utilized in various military conflicts. Also referred to as decapitations, such operations have been at the centre of the American counterterrorism campaign since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The use of drones has been particularly consequential in such schemes. In fact, MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper drones have killed myriad high ranking al Qaeda officials and affiliates in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, earning themselves the reputation of

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “Chronology: July 16, 2014 – October 15, 2014,” *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 1 (2015c): p. 133.

¹²³ Bureau of Investigative Journalism. “US strikes in Yemen, 2002 to present.”

being “Washington’s weapon of choice.”¹²⁴ As this paper indicated, the existing literature on leadership targeting has gravitated around the question of the practice’s strategic effectiveness, focusing on characteristics that are internal to the targeted groups to explain the organizations’ (in)ability to withstand decapitation. However, scholars have overlooked a key feature of terrorist groups, namely the organizational dynamics of their respective identities. Building on Ahmad’s work on group identity, this paper sought to fill this void, highlighting the importance of group identities and the organizational dynamics associated with these identities in determining the outcome of decapitations and, more importantly, to assess the effectiveness of leadership targeting as a strategy and not merely a tactic.

The paper hypothesized that in cases where leadership targeting was tactically successful, a group’s identity would help determine the outcome of the decapitation on the targeted group. To be sure, it argued that a group whose identity stems from an ethnic or tribal lineage would be more likely to fragment (following H1) when their leaders were the victim of decapitation while a group with a global identity would be more likely to retain cohesion (following H2). This paper empirically investigated the cases of two Sunni Islamist terrorist organizations: al Qaeda in Iraq and Ansar al-Sharia. While AQI, who operates in Iraq, possesses a global identity, Yemen’s AAS is more closely associated with an ethnic or tribal identity. Although the case study on AAS only lends derivative support for H1, the case of AQI offers strong substantiation for H2.

This research offers four important contributions. First, it devised an original argument to understand the effects that intense external pressures have on targeted terrorist organizations—an important theoretical contribution that will allow scholars to better comprehend the effect of decapitation across a wider range of terrorist groups and war theatres than those discussed above. Second, it introduced a new position in the unsettled discussion on the strategic effectiveness of leadership targeting practice: the nature of the targeted group’s identity matters, for it can determine the outcome of the decapitation. While it is prudent not to generalize the above findings, the argument presented above challenges the existing literature on the effectiveness of leadership targeting in at least two cases. Third, this paper represents a first attempt at connecting

¹²⁴ Byman, “Why Drones Work.”

the literature on leadership targeting with research on group fragmentation in civil conflicts, which is exemplified by the case study on AAS. Finally, practitioners who will chose to employ decapitation in their efforts to counter terrorist organizations are informed of possible outcomes of such tactic. Going back to the question about the strategic effectiveness of decapitation, none of the two outcomes presented in this paper's main argument represent a silver bullet to the threat posed by Sunni jihadist groups and suggest that decapitation is strategically ineffective. A prudent conclusion based on the above research therefore calls for a warning to policymakers waging the pros and cons of decapitations: pick your poison.

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