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DECAPITATION NATION

A New Model for Examining Leadership
Targeting in Counterterrorism

JACOB FINN

Horizon 5.0: **Decapitation Nation: A New Model for Examining Leadership Targeting in Counterterrorism**

Jacob Finn

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Abstract

When does leadership decapitation against terrorist groups cause their demise? This article reviews the existing body of literature concerning terrorist leadership targeting and identifies limitations in the prevailing approaches. As past attempts to gauge the efficacy of decapitation strategies are disputed, this article calls for a new methodology for conducting decapitation research. Deriving from two themes in the security literature—works on leadership targeting in conventional warfare and counterterrorism, as well as studies of “informal” terrorist actors—this article proposes that analysts and policymakers adopt a holistic framework for organizing knowledge around leadership decapitation. The author conceptualizes a model of leadership decapitation by dividing it into strategic, operational, and tactical levels of targeting with respect to both formal and informal terrorist actors. Empirical examples are drawn from U.S. and allied decapitation attempts against members of al-Qaeda and other actors in the broader movement for global jihad. Although the framework does not attest to the effectiveness of leadership targeting, it is a theoretical starting point implying new avenues for evaluating terrorism data. Consequently, this article elucidates research and policy implications for leadership decapitation in counterterrorism.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or any U.S. government agency.

Introduction

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Introduction

The United States and other countries have employed a strategy of leadership targeting in the fight against terrorist organizations in general, and al-Qaeda and its affiliates, in particular.¹ The conventional wisdom holds that by removing the top leaders of terrorist organizations—either through their deaths or arrests—governments are more likely to degrade or defeat terrorist groups, and consequently, the threat that terrorism poses to state security. Leadership decapitation is said to work when the removal of charismatic or transformational leaders—critical to organizational ideology, operations, and survival—causes terrorist groups to decline.² The foremost academic debate concerns whether this strategy is effective in combatting terrorism and under what conditions render its success more or less likely. Unfortunately, no consensus exists. While some researchers point to evidence that leadership targeting reduces the ability of terrorist organizations to operate,³ others observe that such a strategy is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst.⁴

Aside from this debate, what is puzzling is that, in practice, terrorist leadership targeting has mostly occurred against actors who would *not* be considered the topmost heads of their organizations. While in theory, actions such as drone strikes or special operations raids are designed to remove figures viewed as the most critical to group operations and survival, in reality this has not been the case. Across the total number of targeted killings and captures that U.S. military forces and intelligence agencies have carried out, only few have engaged high-value targets. This observation comes from databases tracking counterterrorism strikes. For example, one dataset at the New America Foundation tracks “United States’ drone strikes and other operations in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.”⁵ According to this record, the United States has used drones and other methods to eliminate approximately 1,910-3,071 militants in Pakistan, 1,197-1,533 militants in Yemen, and 1,330-1,634 militants in Somalia.⁶ The database also reports the identity and affiliation of the targeted individuals and their organizational roles. Most targeted militants in U.S. counterterrorism operations are identified as local commanders, spokesmen, propagandists, weaponeers, and mid-to-low level operatives working for al-Qaeda or its affiliates. Evidently the clear majority of those targeted have not been the top leaders of their respective groups.

Aside from empirical observations, this pattern of leadership targeting is consistent with the stances of the previous Bush and Obama administrations which upheld that the U.S. had and maintains the legal right to target al-Qaeda terrorists and their associates wherever they may be.⁷ The U.S. policy does not preclude the kill or capture of terrorists that some analysts have called “middle managers”;⁸ these are actors responsible for connecting the strategic direction of an organization’s top leaders to the actions of its grassroots operators, as well as groups of

individuals assessed as showing “signatures of militancy” but whose identities are unknown.⁹ Moreover, as some analysts point out regarding America’s drone program in Pakistan and elsewhere, it appears that the target of counterterrorism strikes has expanded beyond the leaders of terrorist organizations seeking violence against the United States to also include lower-level operatives and actors that target local governments.¹⁰ While in principle leadership targeting is presumed to be used against named terrorists, specifically the top leaders of groups connected to 9/11 and other Western plots, in practice the strategy targets a wider range of al-Qaeda and affiliated terrorists who pose threats to American or international security.

Given the fact that leadership targeting remains a cornerstone of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy, the discrepancy between its theoretical use and practical application must be addressed if researchers and practitioners wish to accurately assess or improve this policy’s effectiveness. Aside from a host of methodological problems such as reliance on single country case studies and incomplete quantitative data, this article argues that there are two fundamental limitations of prevailing studies in terrorist leadership targeting. First, research has primarily focused on whether decapitating *strategic* leaders of organizations results in the decline of terrorist groups and the conditions that render this outcome more or less likely. These are the individuals who define the official objectives, both ideological and physical, of the organization and are often the group founders. In comparison, the contributions that middle and low-level leaders make to the operational or tactical activities of terrorist groups and the effects that their removals have on terrorism’s decline are largely underexplored. Failing to analyze terrorist leadership and targeting through a multi-echelon lens—one that acknowledges the contribution of leaders at all levels of authority—will be counterproductive for future empirical studies.

Second, leadership targeting has mostly been studied in the context of “formal” terrorist organizations. These institutions pursue collectively defined terrorist goals. They are built on established structures and processes, contain identifiable members occupying functionally distinct roles, and are led by figures with positions of recognized authority.¹¹ While terrorist groups remain a critical component of today’s security apparatus, the current approach towards leadership targeting fails to recognize the contemporary state of loosely organized, covert, and transnational actors. These individuals operate through “informal networks” and individually as “terrorist entrepreneurs.”¹² Informal terrorist networks lack the signatures of formal organizations; they do not have the same centralized structural formations or identifiable membership affiliations. Likewise, terrorist entrepreneurs act as informal and influential authorities through their innovative and independent-minded approaches to terrorism. Consequently, without the same features of leaders in formal terrorist organizations, informal terrorist actors are hardly identified and included in studies of leadership decapitation.

To the author’s knowledge, there have been only two attempts to define levels of terrorist leadership and targeting in these terms.¹³ While the first study categorizes the multilevel

authorities of terrorist leaders, its scope is not an evaluation of leadership targeting. Rather, it is an attempt to classify the boundaries of contemporary terrorist groups. The second study is similarly limited. Although it offers an evaluation of three forms of decapitation against certain types of leaders, it only does so with respect to targeted killings. Moreover, it refers only to leadership attacks on formal organizations but not with respect to decapitations against informal terrorist actors. Therefore, this article is an original contribution to the literature on terrorism studies in its effort to integrate both approaches.

This article aims to combine existing literature on leadership targeting in both conventional warfare and counterterrorism, alongside recent trends towards the inclusion of informal terrorist actors in scholarly analysis. In light of futile attempts to gauge the efficacy of leadership targeting, this article calls for a new methodology towards decapitation research. Researchers and practitioners should organize knowledge around decapitation by applying a strategic-operational-tactical framework of leadership targeting. In this model, levels of targeted action correspond to the degree of control terrorist leaders maintain in the group or movement and the form of influence exerted on others. Whereas previous assessments have drawn general attention to the need for a multilevel approach in these terms, this is the first known attempt to provide extensive definition and classification of terrorist decapitation against three tiers of leadership. In doing so, it provides a unique contribution to research on terrorist leadership targeting by applying the new reality of contemporary terrorism, that is, the continuum of formal and informal terrorist actors in the movement for global jihad.

The article is structured as follows. First, it thoroughly surveys four major bodies of literature on leadership targeting and identifies findings and limitations in previous studies. In the following two sections, it draws from works classifying leadership targeting as well as studies of “informal terrorism” which, when considered jointly, forms a holistic approach. From this, the author conceptualizes a typology of leadership decapitation which organizes the method into strategic, operational, and tactical levels of targeting with respect to both formal and informal terrorist actors. To substantiate this framework, the subsequent section draws on empirical examples from U.S. and allied leadership decapitation efforts against members of al-Qaeda and the broader movement for global jihad.¹⁴ Although this study sets the foundation for how decapitations against terrorists fit into the proposed framework, it in and of itself is not an attempt to assess the effectiveness of leadership targeting. Nonetheless, as a theoretical starting point, the framework implies new avenues for testing terrorism data. Thus, the article concludes by elucidating some preliminary research and policy implications of adopting a holistic strategy.

Chapter

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Terrorist Leadership Targeting: Literature Review and Research Gaps

There are at least four distinct areas in the literature on leadership targeting that inform assessments of this policy's effectiveness in combatting terrorism.¹⁵ These include (1) the function of leaders in terrorist organizations, (2) single country case studies, (3) effects of capturing vs. killing terrorist leaders, and (4) quantitative assessments of effectiveness. These areas, including research findings and limitations, are subsequently described.

The Function of Leaders in Terrorist Organizations

The fundamental role that leaders play in terrorist groups is critical to understanding the effects leadership decapitation has on terrorism outcomes. Scholars have referenced theories of charismatic or transformational leadership which help to explain how terrorist leaders can shape ideology, operations, and organizational survival. Many analyses are based on Max Weber's observation that charismatic leaders exhibit special powers or qualities that "are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader."¹⁶ As Jenna Jordan notes with respect to Weber's conclusion, followers who regard their leaders as having divine or exclusive qualities are also likely to believe that they are irreplaceable.¹⁷ It follows that studies evaluating the function of terrorist leaders—and the effect that decapitation has on terrorism's decline—focus on the conditions that make replacing terrorist group leaders the most difficult.

For example, Audrey Cronin argues that the effect of killing or capturing charismatic enemy leaders is dependent on variables such as "the structure of the organization, whether the leader created a cult of personality, and the presence of a viable successor."¹⁸ Illustrating the removals of Abimael Guzmán (Peru's Sendero Luminoso), Abdullah Ocalan (the Kurdistan Worker's Party [PKK]), Michael McKevitt (the Real Irish Republican Army [RIRA]), and Shoko Asahara (Japan's Aum Shinrikyo), Cronin contends that the selective targeting of these captivating leaders was pivotal in the demise of their respective groups. She further extends her analysis to the case of al-Qaeda and argues that, in contradiction to the aforementioned case studies, the elimination of Bin Laden would be insignificant to the group's demise due to al-Qaeda's mutable structure, absence of a cult of personality, and evidence of a succession plan.¹⁹

Bryan Price attributes the value of charismatic leaders to the power and cohesion of terrorist groups. He argues that leadership succession in organizations which are violent, clandestine,

and values-based is especially difficult to achieve following the decapitation of charismatic leaders.²⁰ Violent organizations tend to be more cohesive in response to intense counterterrorism efforts. They also rely heavily on the leader's charisma as the basis for their authority to command violent acts; these characteristics taken together make the organization more likely to experience instability following a change in leadership.²¹ In terrorist groups which are clandestine, group leaders maintain operational security and avoid detection by decentralizing their operations and formal command procedures. Susceptible to state infiltration or power overthrows from inferior group members, terrorist leaders "hesitate to provide subordinates with the knowledge and skills to run the organization in their place."²² Leadership decapitations cause havoc when successors cannot inherit group operations or establish effective command-and-control. Finally, values-based organizations such as religious terrorist groups rely on the transformational qualities of leaders who speak to the passions and values of their followers. Particularly in ideological organizations, transformational and charismatic leaders are pivotal to the expansion and sustainment of terrorist campaigns. Leadership succession is therefore difficult when incoming surrogates—lacking the same transformational skills and qualities—have ideological outlooks or group objectives in contrast with their predecessors'.²³

The specific roles that charismatic leaders serve in terrorist groups are another set of factors that impact the effect of leadership targeting. Drawing from organizational theory, Michael Freeman asserts that there are two fundamental roles a terrorist leader plays which might help to predict whether leadership decapitation can degrade or defeat terrorist groups.²⁴ First, terrorist leaders serve an inspirational role. Through charisma and ideological vision, leaders inspire their followers to overcome the collective action problem which plagues terrorist groups. Second, terrorist leaders provide operational guidance. Leaders command the rank-and-file to do specific things; they design and implement policies to achieve group outcomes and maintain "control of strategy, tactics, and organizational issues."²⁵ According to Freeman, when leaders provide both functions to the terrorist group, decapitation efforts are most likely to influence organizational decline. However, even when incumbent to positions of power, some leaders lose hold of these functions when their inspiration fails to "routinize," or their organizations become decentralized and/or bureaucratized.²⁶ Like Cronin, Freeman agreed that the elimination of Bin Laden would have little independent effect on the power of al-Qaeda given Bin Laden's temporal loss of operational and ideological control as a leader.²⁷

Both Cronin and Freeman's claims support this article's assessment that overemphasizing the importance of top terrorist leaders in the study of leadership decapitation is problematic for evaluating program efficacy. Studies on leadership targeting have unquestioningly accepted the organizational theory of terrorist groups; that there exist top individuals who provide strategic, operational, or tactical command and ideological support to the subordinate rank-and-file. Essentially, this approach fails to recognize the decentralization of terrorist groups and the emergence of radical networks and terrorist entrepreneurs.²⁸ This informal trend has caused

some analysts to warn, particularly with respect to Islamic religious-motivated terrorism, of an imminent “leaderless jihad.”²⁹

Single Country Case Studies

Researchers and policymakers have made claims about the effectiveness of leadership targeting based on observations of terrorist campaigns in singular contexts. Case studies on leadership decapitation tend to draw from four main country/regional conflicts: Israel-Palestine, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Latin America. Israel’s policy of leadership targeting is the most cited example.³⁰ Israel’s security forces have historically used targeted killings against the leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and enemy Arab armies. The height of targeted killing came during the second Palestinian intifada.³¹ Analysts have assessed the posterior effects of high-value killings of senior terrorists such as Hamas leaders Salah Shehada and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, PFLP Secretaries-General Mustafa Zibri and Abu Ali Mustafa, and al-Aqsa Brigades leader Raed al-Karmi. Boaz Ganor, for example, claims that targeted killing serves as a deterrent force against terrorist leaders who must expend more time on organizational security and less on planning attacks: “Disrupting the organization’s routine is liable to have ongoing consequences, rather than merely a short-term effect.”³² Scholars in support of Israel’s strategy draw on empirical data to show that leadership decapitations during the second Intifada weakened the lethality of Hamas attacks;³³ decreased the frequency of suicide tactics;³⁴ and failed to prolong “tit-for-tat” cycles of violence.³⁵ David Jaeger and Daniele Paserman observe that Palestinians were more likely to respond with violence when targeted killings were against low-level terrorist operatives.³⁶ On the contrary, some studies argue that Israel’s campaign against Palestinian leaders has been ineffective or counterproductive. These studies suggest that targeting group leaders fails to decrease rates of Palestinian terrorism³⁷ and sometimes even leads to spikes in Palestinian retaliatory violence, outcomes often cited as “martyrdom” or “boomerang” effects.³⁸

The United States campaign in regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan is another source for research on leadership targeting. The debate focuses on the consequences that America’s unmanned drone program and other operations have had on levels of violence from organizations such as al-Qaeda Core, the Haqqani Network, the Afghani Taliban, and Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP). In Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) where terrorist groups have sought refuge, U.S. forces have engaged militants when their Pakistani counterparts have either refused or failed to act. Some studies claim that drone strikes in Pakistan have denied terrorists sanctuaries to train and operate,³⁹ decreased the frequency and lethality of local terrorist attacks,⁴⁰ and impaired the capacity of groups to carry out lethal attacks in the United States and Western Europe.⁴¹ Alternatively, findings opposed to American strikes contend that drones have failed to deter prospective terrorists in the West from traveling

to the FATA for training.⁴² Others argue that drone warfare has led to blowback effects such as widespread retaliation against the U.S., further destabilization of Pakistan, and weakening of U.S.-Pakistani ties.⁴³ Alex Wilner finds that in the Afghan theater, targeted killings against Taliban operational leaders have degraded group professionalism, reduced success rates, moderated terrorist selection of targets, and diminished group morale.⁴⁴ Austin Long appears to make a notable contribution in assessing the Taliban's degree of "institutionalization."⁴⁵ This refers to the existence of organizational hierarchy, functional divisions of labor, and bureaucratic processes and standard operating procedures. As opposed to Wilner's conclusion, Long's analysis suggests that the Quetta Shura (Afghani) Taliban, at least until 2013, successfully recovered from ISAF attacks on its leadership due to the presence of these factors which helped sustain organizational continuity.⁴⁶

Finally, various studies have looked at cases of leadership targeting against militant groups operating in Latin America. Morehouse finds that the Colombian government's targeted killings of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) officials led to fewer attacks, although the severity of the attacks remained unchanged.⁴⁷ The effect, he argues, is due to FARC's hierarchical and centralized structure. In a study of leadership targeting against Peru's Shining Path, the Peruvian government's capture of terrorist leader Abimael Guzmán had a significant negative influence on the group's ability to carry out attacks.⁴⁸ Brian Phillips assesses leadership decapitation in Mexico, but unlike previous studies of political terrorist groups, the author looks at how targeting the leaders of criminal organizations, such as drug traffickers, helps to reduce violence.⁴⁹ He finds that leadership targeting in this context is associated with short-term reductions in drug-related homicides with long-term increases.⁵⁰ Phillips also finds that this effect is stronger when leaders are captured rather than killed, and, when leaders are mid-tier instead of top-tier.⁵¹

While the examination of case studies is important for providing qualitative depth to evaluate the effectiveness of terrorist leadership targeting, the methodology is fraught with problems. Predominantly, case studies limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts. Outcomes of offensive counterterrorism campaigns may be dependent on case-specific factors such as the nature of actors in the conflict (e.g. terrorist organizations vs. insurgent groups vs. criminal enterprises), the agency of the targeting actor (e.g. whether the state is targeting terrorist groups in a sovereign foreign nation or domestic terrorist groups at home), and the historical context of conflicts (e.g. groups fighting for causes with international legitimacy vs. groups that are byproducts of long-standing civil wars). Aside from problems with generalizability, single country examples, especially studies assessing leadership targeting against Salafi-jihadi groups, fail to consider the transnational character of today's terrorism. Although targeting terrorist leaders in one country might be important for achieving immediate objectives, such as to reduce local violence, it fails to account for the possibility of terrorist attacks in disconnected places.

Effects of Capturing vs. Killing Terrorist Leaders

In a strategy of leadership targeting, there are two potential outcomes: the arrest of the leader or the death of the leader. Both tactics require significant intelligence gathering, planning, and precision to be carried out successfully. Although counterterrorism policymakers prioritize arresting terrorist leaders for the extraction of actionable intelligence to gain knowledge of terrorist networks, internal structures, and impending plots, capture is not always feasible. Counterterrorism forces may elect to eliminate targets altogether.

Disputes in the literature on the outcomes of capturing vs. killing terrorist leaders disagree over which tactic is more effective in ending terrorist campaigns. In addition to intelligence collection, advocates of taking leaders into custody, through secret arrests and renditions, cite fewer civilian casualties and limited media publicity. In this respect, the clandestine nature of targeted capture is useful in curbing possible blowback effects. For instance, Aaron Mannes finds less casualties in subsequent terrorist attacks when the leader of a religious group is arrested rather than killed.⁵² In the case of Israel, preventative arrests were significantly more effective in the reduction of suicide attacks as opposed to targeted killings of suspected terrorists.⁵³ In an analysis of specific targeting tactics, Lehrke and Schomaker find that rendition, used in transporting arrestees, is far more effective in reducing worldwide terrorism than is the use of drone strikes for killing.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, it appears that empirical studies supporting the arrest of terrorist leaders are limited due to the historical dearth of data on capture operations.⁵⁵

Despite these findings, other scholars claim that killing terrorist leaders is more effective than taking them into custody. From this perspective, targeted killings achieve a degree of deterrence by coercion. In the leader's view, his or her termination represents a far more significant personal cost to participating in terrorism.⁵⁶ Alternatively, terrorist leaders threatened with detention will calculate lower costs of participating in violence. It is perceived that, if caught, leaders can always live to fight another day. As such, empirical studies back the claim that targeted killing is a superior tactic. For instance, Patrick Johnston finds that kill operations are significantly more effective at ending insurgent campaigns and achieving government victory.⁵⁷ This effect, Johnston notes, is partially consistent with Jenna Jordan's findings. Jordan agrees that killing leaders can have better outcomes; however, her results suggest that this effect is only observed when the tactic is used against the "top" leader of an organization. On the other hand, arrest was more effective in collapsing terrorist groups when used against "upper echelon" leaders.⁵⁸

The remainder of studies argue that killing terrorist leaders is equally likely to disrupt terrorist groups as would capturing them, albeit under certain circumstances. Staeheli finds that targeted killing and targeted incarceration are equally effective; what mainly matters is whether group leaders have clear successors.⁵⁹ This claim echoes the findings of Cronin.⁶⁰ Likewise, Bryan Price shows that killing, capturing, and even capturing *then* killing terrorist leaders are

equally effective.⁶¹ Matt Frankel's research concludes that the effect of choosing one tactic over the other does not necessarily advance the overall likelihood of success: "the preference often depends on the enemy being faced and the accessibility of the target," and thus, he advises policymakers to "capture when you can, kill when you have to."⁶²

Quantitative Assessments of Effectiveness

The most methodical source for pronouncements on the effectiveness of leadership targeting is from empirical studies employing quantitative approaches. The terrorism studies literature forms three general conclusions on the efficacy of leadership decapitation: the strategy is either successful, ineffective, or counterproductive in degrading or defeating violent organizations. Observers in the "successful" camp point to reductions in the number or frequency of terrorist attacks; the lethality of attacks; the duration of campaigns; the mortality rate of terrorist groups; the severity of tactics and the discrimination of targets. For instance, Patrick Johnston's study finds that leadership decapitation "increases governments' chances of defeating insurgencies, reduces insurgent attacks, and diminishes overall levels of violence."⁶³ In an analysis of 118 leadership decapitation attempts from a sample of 90 distinct targeting campaigns, Johnston shows that targeting terrorist leaders (1) increases the termination rate of terrorist campaigns, (2) increases the chances of government victory over (defeat of) terrorist groups, (3) reduces the number of innocents killed in an insurgency, and (4) reduces the number of insurgent attacks. His research finds that these results are irrespective of the ideology or organizational age of militant groups nor is there indication of a blowback or martyrdom effect. Notably, the findings are limited in several ways. First, as Jenna Jordan observes, Johnston's analysis focuses entirely on insurgencies; although some terrorist organizations engage in guerilla or insurgent tactics, insurgencies do not always employ terrorism.⁶⁴ Second, Johnston's dataset is restricted to the years 1975 to 2003; this excludes the clear majority of U.S. leadership targeting attempts since that period and particularly decapitations against groups espousing jihadi ideologies. Finally, Johnston's study fails to identify decapitations against "upper-echelon, midtier, and low-level leaders in clandestine organizations."⁶⁵ He acknowledges that "future research is necessary to address second-order questions about the impact of removing upper-echelon and midtier insurgents and terrorists from militant organizations. Targeting the middle ranks of insurgencies has indeed been key to Israeli counterterrorism strategy as well as to U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq."⁶⁶

Bryan Price's research makes similar pro-decapitation conclusions. As mentioned previously, Price argues that removing top terrorist leaders increases the mortality rate of groups that are inherently violent, clandestine, and values-based. Terrorist groups with these organizational characteristics appear more vulnerable to leadership decapitation because these features "amplify the importance of leaders and make succession of leaders after decapitation difficult."⁶⁷

Unlike Johnston and others who measure short-term metrics,⁶⁸ Price's analysis differs in its evaluation of the long-term "effects of decapitation on the duration of terrorist groups as opposed to the number, frequency, or lethality of attacks after a group experiences leadership decapitation."⁶⁹ Using the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to analyze 207 terrorist groups from 1970 to 2008, Price finds that leadership targeting significantly increases the mortality rate of violent organizations within two years of decapitation. The study also shows that the rate of terrorist group mortality is independent of group characteristics such as ideology, size, and age, nor is it contingent on the regime-type of the countering state. Nonetheless, it too fails to analyze leadership decapitation attempts against non-strategic, mid-to-low level leaders. Price agrees that "including leaders at all levels would be an improvement over this study."⁷⁰

Other quantitative studies assess how leadership targeting effectively mitigates the use of specific terrorist group tactics or influences organizations to alter their targets. For instance, Ophir Falk finds that targeted killings of ideological leaders, primarily those based in Gaza, resulted in significant decreases in Palestinian suicide attacks.⁷¹ However, it is unclear whether the effects of offensive measures (e.g., targeted killings) could be disaggregated from the effects of defensive measures such as increased border security at Gaza's barrier wall. Nonetheless, another important finding is that the targeted killing of senior ideological and political figures had a greater effect on suicide violence than did the targeting of lower-level operational commanders.⁷² Alex Wilner finds similar results. Although he employs a quasi-experimental approach rather than a purely quantitative methodology, Wilner finds that as Afghani-Taliban leaders were eliminated, the group began using less sophisticated forms of violence such as IEDs and small arms and rocket fire in place of deadlier suicide bombings. The remaining operatives altered their objectives by opting to select "less formidable targets to attack, such as Afghan government officials, civil-society actors, and off-duty police commanders, rather than hardened military actors."⁷³ Unfortunately, both studies are country-case specific and neither shows leadership decapitation's effects against terrorist leaders with mid-to-low tier qualities.

Alternatively, quantitative studies that claim leadership decapitation is ineffective or possibly counterproductive point to surges in the frequency or lethality of attacks, extensions of organizational life expectancy, and adoptions of tactics that are more violent and targets that are less discriminate. In their study, Hafez and Hatfield assess 151 incidents of Israeli targeted killings and their effect on the rate of Palestinian attacks from 2000 to 2004.⁷⁴ They find that attempts to selectively target militants failed to significantly decrease Palestinian violence; however, contrary to analyses purporting the existence of blowback effects, they did not find evidence that targeted killings increased Palestinian violence either. Thus, the authors conclude that "it may well be that the political utility of targeted assassinations is more effective than its military one."⁷⁵ Although an important contribution as one of the earliest published quantitative studies, Hafez and Hatfield do not breakdown the levels of leadership targeting. Their pooling of individuals with different roles—from suicide bombing planners and local area commanders to

leaders of Hamas' political and military wings—paints the effects of leadership targeting with a single brush. It restricts our understanding of how decapitation impacts rates of terrorism when used against individuals of different strategic, operational, or tactical levels of authority.

Jenna Jordan extends this research by investigating the effects of attacks on terrorist leadership against groups of varying age, size, and organizational type.⁷⁶ An evaluation of 298 leadership decapitations against 96 groups operating from 1945 to 2004 confirms her hypothesis that religious or separatist groups which are larger or have existed longer are more resistant to attacks on their leadership.⁷⁷ Jordan further finds that in many cases leadership targeting has counterproductive effects. Groups that were older, larger, and of all ideological persuasions—especially religious and separatist—were likely to survive longer than similar groups not targeted.⁷⁸ In a follow-on study, Jenna Jordan explains that high levels of bureaucratization, found in larger and older groups, and high levels of communal support, in religious and separatist groups, account for why such groups withstand attacks on their leadership.⁷⁹ These findings are foundational for subsequent research assessing the effects of institutionalization on organizational resilience.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, as with trends previously highlighted, Jordan's assessment of terrorist leadership fails to clearly distinguish top officials from leaders in the rank-and-file. Her admittedly broad classification of leadership, defined as "either the top leader of an organization or any member of the upper echelon who holds a position of authority,"⁸¹ disregards the contributions that middle and low-tier individuals make to terrorism's success.

Still, quantitative studies in the "anti" leadership targeting camp look beyond metrics of lethality, frequency of attacks, and life expectancy to show how decapitation negatively effects terrorists' choice of tactics and targets. Groups who lose their leaders sometimes resort to indiscriminate attacks, redirecting violence from military to civilian targets.⁸² Abrahms and Mierau's study, on the Israel-West Bank-Gaza and Afghanistan-Pakistan conflicts, finds that targeted killings against militant groups in these theaters significantly altered the tactical behavior of operatives taking their place. Following a successful leadership strike, militants were more likely to attack civilian targets than they were to attack military ones.⁸³ The authors propose that the natural vulnerability of soft targets, retaliation effects, and principal-agent dissonance on strategies and end-goals might be reasons that explain why leadership deficits result in the selection of indiscriminate targets.

Overall, it appears that while scholarly works on leadership targeting have made notable attempts to quantify empirical information, they all have faced one common challenge: the unreliability or dearth of evidence.⁸⁴ There is no certainty that all accounts are accurate or that all significant decapitations are included. Due to the secretive nature of leadership targeting programs, the dearth of evidence is attributed to systemic faults in intelligence agency and local media reporting. Intelligence agencies charged with handling counterterrorism are sometimes incentivized to withhold information on covert actions. Releasing information on certain events

could jeopardize future operations by tipping off terrorist groups about the sources or methods that were relied upon for intelligence collection. Public disclosures on militant or civilian casualties and on details of decapitation's sometimes gruesome effects might also trigger political or physical backlash against Western countries. Likewise, media portrayals, often depended upon for datasets, contain their own degree of bias in reporting. While governments claim that those killed or arrested are legitimate targets, others such as family members, local authorities, and even militants report that the targeted victims were civilians.⁸⁵ Thus, academic attempts relying on datasets such as the one presented in the introduction of this article cannot be labeled conclusive until the total of intelligence is accurately produced.

In summary, analyses in four fields—the function of leadership in terrorist groups, single-country case studies, capture vs. kill debates, and quantitative assessments of effectiveness—reveal several limitations in the research on leadership targeting in counterterrorism. Although the current literature provides invaluable insight into the history and use of leadership decapitation, there is still no scholarly consensus on the effectiveness of decapitation strategies. Nonetheless, what is markedly absent is an evaluation of how this strategy effects terrorism when used against individuals who are not the “top” or “strategic” leaders of their groups. There has neither been any investigation of decapitation's use against targets who are not formally linked to terrorist organizations but who act as leaders in informal settings. Since little research to date has evaluated decapitation strategies against these sets of actors, the rest of this article is dedicated to doing so.

Chapter

02

The Levels of Leadership Targeting Approach: Drawing from Lessons in Conventional Warfare and Counterterrorism

Leadership decapitation is not a strategy exclusive to counterterrorism. Before any analysis of levels of targeting against terrorist actors can be provided, it is important to introduce how attacking leadership has been a cornerstone of conventional warfare, that is, conflict between sovereign states. Before the rise of nonstate actors, military theorists argued that enemy organizations—typically the armies of adversarial states—contained identifiable sources of power that linked all their belligerent parts. The strategist and Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz famously alluded to these as the enemies’ “centers of gravity.” In his book *On War*, Clausewitz postulated that an enemy’s center of gravity is “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends,” and thus, he concluded that this should be the target “against which all our energies should be directed.”⁸⁶ Nonetheless, Clausewitz’s work appears to be limited. It does not explain the relationship between attacking centers of gravity and resultant military outcomes. Granted this was not Clausewitz’s primary objective. However, his analysis also suggests that the location of the hubs of power are restricted to the military unit itself: “those centers of gravity will be found wherever the forces are most concentrated.”⁸⁷ Notably, Clausewitz makes no explicit mention on the role of enemy leadership in coordinating a belligerent forces’ strategic, operational or tactical objectives.

Robert Pape makes important contributions in both regards. In his book *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*, Pape argues that the main variable linking attacks on centers of gravity to the paralysis of enemy organizations is *coercion* at the strategic level of war.⁸⁸ Coercion, he argues, involves “efforts to change the behavior of a state by manipulating costs and benefits.”⁸⁹ Coercion is used to influence the strategic calculus of adversary leadership and differs from the costly and time-consuming “brute force” approach which aims to annihilate enemies altogether. Whereas Pape argues that *coercion by denial* — the process of thwarting an enemy’s military strategy and weakening them to the point that they no longer have the resources or capabilities needed to achieve their objectives—is the ultimate strategy for achieving a limited and swift victory, contemporary military doctrine (Air Force policy in particular) has favored a strategy of *coercion by decapitation* which attempts to disable key leadership. Pape identifies three types of decapitation⁹⁰ and among them is leadership decapitation which “[seeks] to kill specific leaders on the assumption that they are the driving force behind the war

and that eliminating them will lead to peace, either because their successors are not as committed to the objectives of the war or because they fear that they too will become targets in turn.”⁹¹ Governments have favored decapitation as a military strategy because, according to Pape, it “offers the possibility of successful coercion with minimal commitment of resources and risk of life.”⁹² However, he does not advocate the approach given the difficulty of collecting real-time intelligence on individuals then striking rapidly, as well as the prospect for enemy backlash, civilian casualties and collateral damage.⁹³

Robert Pape cites Colonel John A. Warden III as the theorist most closely associated with leadership decapitation in conventional warfare. Warden was one of the chief architects of the United States’ Desert Storm air campaign in Iraq. He acknowledges that attacking an enemy’s leadership is key to achieving war victory. Since an enemy’s command structure—consisting of its political and military leaders—is the only body with the authority to make concessions during conflict, it follows that the command structure should be the target of military efforts. Warden observes that “wars through history have been fought to change (or change the mind of) the command structure—to overthrow the prince literally or figuratively or to induce the command structure to make concessions. Capturing or killing the state’s leader has frequently been decisive.”⁹⁴

Although their analyses are limited to air campaigns in conventional warfare, Robert Pape and John A. Wardens’ conceptual development of leadership decapitation inspire military planners to apply the center of gravity theory to all types of operations (e.g. counterterrorism, counterinsurgency). To achieve the most cost-effective strategy for victory, U.S. political and military leaders recognize that their energies should not unquestionably be directed against the points where adversaries are most concentrated, as Clausewitz once assumed, but rather, against the enabling enemy leadership. This includes the leaders of terrorist and insurgent groups.

Both military theorists and policymakers are interested in understanding how targeting centers of gravity (i.e. foreign leadership) translates to the stated aims and objectives of U.S. military engagements. The literature on leadership targeting in conventional warfare has been co-constituted with the U.S. military’s conception of the levels of warfare associated with armed conflict. The military officially designates three layers which conflict is fought, reflecting national objectives. These are the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of warfare. According to the Department of Defense’s publication on joint operations, these levels are defined as:

- **Strategic Level of Warfare:** The level of warfare at which a nation, often as a member of a group of nations, determines national or multinational (alliance or coalition) strategic security objectives and guidance, then develops and uses national resources to achieve those objectives.

- **Operational Level of Warfare:** The level of warfare at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to achieve strategic objectives within theaters or other operational areas.
- **Tactical Level of Warfare:** The level of warfare at which battles and engagements are planned and executed to achieve military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces.⁹⁵

Although this study is not particularly interested in the United States' military leadership and decision-making structure, it does borrow from the "levels of warfare" model because it offers a useful way to understand how targeting different types of leaders results in certain outcomes of conflict. This was the methodology of Colonel S. Clinton Hinote whose analysis of leadership targeting against Iraqi military leaders at multiple levels of war authority serves as a model for the current study.⁹⁶ Although Hinote's emphasis is on leaders of a formal military organization (the Iraqi Armed Forces under Saddam), his call for evaluating leaders at multiple echelons of leadership has important implications for targeting leaders of terrorist or other nonstate groups. If it is true that nonstate violent organizations mimic the leadership structure and authorities of formal state military leaders and operate via similar mission command,⁹⁷ then policymakers can adopt similar approaches for targeting terrorists.

Therefore, when it comes to counterterrorism, efforts to target terrorist leadership are based on locating the center(s) of gravity in terrorist groups. Targeting a terrorist group's center(s) of gravity will cripple the organization when its affiliated components can no longer receive guidance from superior commanders. While some researchers argue that the power of terrorist organizations emanates from grass-tops leaders,⁹⁸ others contend that the real threat of terrorism stems from diffuse, grassroots individuals.⁹⁹ Others assert that the center of gravity lies with the "middle managers" of terrorist networks. Middle managers act as the "connective tissue" linking the objectives of the strategic leaders to the actions of the tactical operators.¹⁰⁰

Few researchers have attempted to systematically define the three types of control or authority that terrorist leaders exert. Brian Jackson appears to be one noteworthy case. First, he explains that terrorist leaders with strategic control or influence maintain "the ability to define top-level goals and aims of the group."¹⁰¹ Jackson explains that Bin Laden is an example of a leader with this type of influence because of his fatwas and statements defining global jihad's strategic aims. Second, terrorist leaders with operational control or influence impact "the activities and operations being carried out in pursuit of the organization's strategic goals."¹⁰² A leader in this category would, for example, provide the specific approval over individual operations, funding strategies, and other actions in support of the group's strategic aims. Finally, Jackson argues that leaders with tactical control or influence command "the specific activities an individual member or component of the organization carries out on a day-to-day basis."¹⁰³ Mohammed Atta, he argues, is an example of this type of leader given his responsibility as the cell commander during the September 11 plot. Jackson's delineation of the three types of authority

that terrorist leaders exert parallels the U.S. military's conception of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of warfare and leadership. However, while the author's goal is to employ this framework within a broader analysis of the boundaries of contemporary terrorist groups, his study is not an evaluation of counterterrorism targeting actions, such as killing or capturing leaders, that can be used against such organizations.

While some studies have suggested a general need for a counterterrorism targeting policy using the strategic, operational, and tactical outline of leadership, few have offered any conceptual framework. Thomas Hunter's research makes an important contribution in this regard, though its scope is limited to the use of targeted killing with little mention of other decapitation strategies. Hunter uses the strategic, operational, and tactical framework to address how policymakers might determine whether targeted killing against terrorist organizations can be considered successful. He argues that the value placed on the success of kill missions at these three levels is based on the counterterrorists' expected outcome. For instance, strategic-level targeted killings are successful when they lead to the overall dissolution of a group or severe degradation of a group's capabilities, usually due to the loss of the organization's "senior leaders or individuals."¹⁰⁴ However, on the operational level, states can employ targeted killings against leaders to mitigate the short to mid-term operations of a terrorist group. Hunter postulates that "the selective elimination of key personnel, particularly those with critical skills (i.e., bomb makers, logisticians, recruiters, financiers), is likely to have a detrimental effect."¹⁰⁵ As has been suggested previously, these individuals tend to be the mid-tier personnel who use their specialized skills to link the vision of the strategic leaders to the operations of their tactical personnel. Targeted killings at this level are meant to force organizations to become operationally ineffective, if only briefly. Finally, Hunter notes that when policymakers are interested in preventing a specific attack, they opt to use targeted killings at the tactical level. Targeting an individual is said to work in the tactical sense when "it directly results in the thwarting of an imminent terrorist attack."¹⁰⁶ As such, surveilling and interdicting an armed terrorist or group of terrorists on their way to executing a plot could be viewed as an effective tactical maneuver.

Aside from the issue of Hunter's singular focus on targeted killing in the context of a multi-authority framework, the author restricts the unit of analysis to the formal terrorist organization. Although traditional terrorist groups remain a critical component of today's threat environment, a dangerous new trend has emerged in recent years involving autonomous individuals committing violent acts. For decapitation to be effective, it must encompass the full spectrum of international threat actors. Any possible framework for leadership targeting must assimilate the research on informal terrorism.

Chapter

03

The Spectrum of Actors Approach: Looking at Agents of Terrorism in the 21st Century

Unlike the hierarchical, membership-based, and identifiable groups that perpetrated terrorism in the twentieth century, an alarming trend of violence by individuals without formal ties to terrorist organizations has emerged in recent years. Although these “informal” terrorist actors—characterized by their involvement in dispersed networks or as autonomous agents—do not appear to pose existential threats to U.S. or international security, they are tenaciously effective in their ability to engage in small yet lethal plots and to spread fear and panic throughout the public. The high rate of attacks in the West by individuals, many previously unknown to authorities, has forced scholars to address their role in the terrorism puzzle. However, as has been raised in the literature review of this article, analyses of decapitation strategies have remained silent on their impact in counterterrorism efforts.

The current study applies Assaf Moghadam’s classification of terrorist agents. In his book *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, Moghadam conceptualizes a spectrum of actors known to commit terrorism.¹⁰⁷ Formal actors include terrorist and insurgent organizations which are historically viewed as the classic agents of terrorism.¹⁰⁸ Paramilitary groups such as the IRA, FARC, al-Qaeda, Aum Shrinkyo, and the Islamic State illustrate these types of organizations. In outlining the characteristics of formal terrorist groups, Moghadam adopts Martha Crenshaw’s definition. She argues that a terrorist organization has four main features:

1. The group has a defined structure and processes by which collective decisions are made;
2. Members of the organization occupy roles that are functionally differentiated;
3. There are recognized leaders in positions of formal authority; and
4. The organization has collective goals that it pursues as a unit, with collective responsibility claimed for its actions. Specific groups tend to have identifiable modus operandi or standard operating procedures.¹⁰⁹

Al-Qaeda, at least until the disfigurement of its nucleus following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, exemplified these characteristics. Formerly headed by Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda “Core” or “Central” maintained hierarchical control over its vast network. Decisions were collectively made among al-Qaeda’s principal leaders who held

“well-defined positions, tasks and salaries.”¹¹⁰ Leaders headed a consultative *majlis al-shura* council, as well as various committees for finance, communications, and military operations. To join al-Qaeda’s membership, recruits pledged a *bayat*, an oath of allegiance, to Bin Laden and his organization. This consequently gave Bin Laden the formal authority required to lead the group. Finally, al-Qaeda’s collective aims and objectives have been expressed in its various *fatwas* and publications over the years. Bin Laden’s “Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites” in which he calls for acts of violence against the “Jewish-Crusader alliance of aggression” and his infamous 1998 *fatwa* declaring “the duty of Muslims to carry out holy war against the enemies of Islam and to expel the Americans from the Gulf region” are two examples.¹¹¹

At the opposite end of the terrorist actor spectrum are what Moghadam calls informal actors. Informal actors include informal networks and terrorist entrepreneurs.¹¹² Informal networks are comprised of “any set of at least two interconnected nodes. The nodes can consist of individuals, cells, groups, organizations, or states.”¹¹³ Unlike formal terrorist organizations, informal networks are characterized by their lack of institutionalized organizational structure, their open membership and fluid organizational boundaries, alongside their decentralization of authority. First, without formal structures of bureaucracy and decision-making, networks can spontaneously rise and act without restraint, while easily absconding law enforcement. Their agility and adaptability, according to Moghadam, allows networks to “affect a variety of important activities, from attracting new members to establishing new ties to other actors, and from overcoming counterterrorism hurdles all the way to planning attacks.”¹¹⁴ Second, the flexible membership of networks allows individuals to join and exit the movement with relatively little cost. Moreover, researchers have shown that previous kinship or friendship ties and shared values reinforce relationships between members of a network.¹¹⁵ This makes it extremely challenging for counterterrorists to differentiate violent actors in a network from their milieu of radical but non-violent supporters. Finally, unlike the hierarchy of leadership that characterizes terrorist organizations, informal networks tend to be decentralized in their command structure. This permits networks to create diffuse hubs of power that are capable of individually attracting new members and performing their own attacks.¹¹⁶

Moghadam also introduces the concept of the “terrorist entrepreneur” as another type of informal terrorist actor. Terrorist entrepreneurs are characterized as “independently minded, highly motivated, and resourceful individuals dedicated to exploiting existing opportunities and seeking novel ways to execute, plan, or support acts of terrorism.”¹¹⁷ As autonomous individuals without ties to formal groups, terrorist entrepreneurs are extremely difficult to distinguish. Through innovative application of technology and lack of oversight from formal organizations, informal actors pose remarkably dangerous threats.¹¹⁸ Indeed, the term “terrorist entrepreneur” is used in the 9/11 Commission Report to describe Khaled Sheikh Muhammad (hereafter “KSM”)—the mastermind of the September 11 attacks—whose development of a plot

to hijack and crash commercial aircraft initially preceded his official proposal of the plan to al-Qaeda leaders and his formal membership in the organization.¹¹⁹ While some entrepreneurs, like KSM, are actively involved in the development and execution of terrorist attacks, the role of the entrepreneur does not preclude individuals who abet terrorism without “getting their hands dirty.”¹²⁰ For instance, the emboldening power of the Internet has allowed innovative terrorist ideologues to radicalize and recruit activists; to provide religious or other justification for certain terrorist acts; to connect and mobilize individuals to other cells or groups; and to spread ideology such as jihadi propaganda. All are activities short of the official threshold for terrorism. Thus, Moghadam concludes, entrepreneurs can act as “force multipliers” with the ability to supplement traditional actors and inflict even greater harm.¹²¹

Aside from the obvious rise in empirical cases in recent years, several developments are worth mentioning, albeit briefly, which have intensified the study and prominence of informal terrorist actors. At least three changes can be observed: (1) the growing acceptance of social network analysis as a tool in the study of terrorism; (2) the expansion of the Internet as a medium for terrorism; and (3) the evolution of global jihad strategy. First, whereas terrorism scholarship in the past has favored micro-level analyses focusing on the psychological and environmental underpinnings of individual terrorists¹²² and organizational-level approaches focusing on terrorist group decision-making,¹²³ only recently has scholarship adopted social network analysis to investigate the dynamic relations between terrorists, and the effects that such ties have on group radicalization, collective ideology, and support for political violence.¹²⁴ These investigations have revealed that informal networks, characterized by their adaptable, flexible, and non-hierarchical structures, increasingly characterize the state of contemporary terrorist actors.¹²⁵

Second, contemporary terrorists have been empowered by the globalization of the Internet and other information and communication technologies. As diplomatic, economic, and military objectives have evolved to meet the security needs of Western nations, so too have the mechanisms which help terrorists evade detection and capture, achieve outcome goals, and sustain life expectancy. The Internet has become a popular instrument in these regards and offers terrorists—both formal organizations, and informal networks and entrepreneurs—many useful advantages. Gabriel Weimann identifies at least eight ways terrorists use the Internet to support their objectives; these include for psychological warfare, publicity and propaganda, intelligence collection, fundraising, recruitment and mobilization, networking, information sharing, and planning and coordination.¹²⁶ The instantaneous flow of information, lack of government regulation, relative inexpensiveness, and ability to impact wide audiences are among the factors which make the Internet a compelling medium for terrorist organizations, and increasingly, informal actors. Indeed, potential terrorists without links to official groups are as easily radicalized online as individuals attending in-person religious centers or training camps. The anonymous and interconnected nature of online forums, chat rooms, and social media sites

allows for the participation of equally influential individuals who lack legitimate religious or other credentials. Marc Sageman argues that “Internet egalitarianism” allows any individual to seek and self-select information he or she agrees with, to abandon views disagreed with, and to actively participate in ideological or operational discourse as opposed to receiving unidirectional orders from higher-ups.¹²⁷ He notes that the Internet “provides general guidance to the participants in the absence of physical command and control found in traditional terrorist organizations.”¹²⁸ Consequently, the decentralized structure of the Internet has nearly undermined the importance of unified terrorist groups, allowing anyone with a keyboard and mouse to claim leadership and offer influence or expertise in a terrorist movement. For instance, the Internet has empowered terrorist entrepreneurs and facilitators, particularly online ideologues, to become skilled in disseminating ideology (specifically jihadi ideology) and in fostering community identity.¹²⁹

Finally, the development of informal terrorist actors can largely be attributed to the evolution of global jihad strategy.¹³⁰ Jihadi Islamist ideology has numerous interpretations pursued by a variety of factions, but the common denominator among all is that Islam faces a continual political, cultural, physical, and religious attack by non-Muslim, Western nations. Global Islamists, as opposed to national Islamists who promote local governments as their target of violence, believe that it is the duty of all Muslims to join in a militant struggle (*jihad*) against far-away enemies, namely, the United States and its allies that continually subjugate the Muslims in the Islamic diaspora (*ummah*).¹³¹ This charge—formally called the “Movement for Global Jihad”—has been spearheaded by jihadi ideologues such as Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden under the banner of a formal organization, al-Qaeda.

While al-Qaeda, via its hierarchy of leadership, has traditionally commanded the strategic, operational, and tactical goals of the movement, a profound change in global jihad strategy can be observed following the organization’s fragmentation since the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. Sustained top-down counterterrorist targeting of al-Qaeda’s leadership has naturally fueled the formation of a leaderless but interconnected movement of jihadi actors. This “leaderless jihad” is broadly the outcome of “the process of radicalization that generates small, local, self-organized groups in a hostile habitat” fomenting a “disconnected global network.”¹³² Jihadi ideologues have encapsulated this outcome and have prescribed a strategy for action. The strategy relies on independent cells absent of linkages to terrorist leaders or organizations. Each cell has the authority to carry out individual acts of terrorism against the enemy. Codified in Abu Musab al-Suri’s *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*¹³³ and based on Louis Beam’s *Leaderless Resistance*,¹³⁴ this strategy calls for convincing adherents of jihadi ideology to form independent groups detached from al-Qaeda’s leadership. Al-Suri argues that as clandestine networks, they are protected from counterterrorist detection if ever one or several nodes are exposed. This strategy has largely been adopted by a “third wave” of Islamic radicals. These are Muslims growing up in host countries who establish interconnected ties, self-radicalize, and

carry out acts of “homegrown terrorism” with little or no guidance from foreign terrorist groups.¹³⁵

This section concludes this article’s discussion of the theoretical foundations which inspire a new approach towards terrorist leadership targeting. Nonetheless, before this article can develop a holistic framework for targeting, it is appropriate to address what some might view as the incompatibility of informal terrorist actors in an analysis of leadership decapitation. If scholars accept the notion that trends in terrorism are characterized by a shift from “leader-led” formal groups to “leaderless” informal networks, then critics might contend that that conventional top-down counterterrorism methods such as decapitation will be ineffective at reducing terrorist violence. However, this is not to say that individuals in informal networks are not “leaders” because they do not hold formal positions of recognized authority. Many individuals, such as cell leaders or entrepreneurs, demonstrate the equivalent characteristics of leadership that are traditionally held by leaders in formal organizations. In fact, research on the general population has shown that variables associated with positive leadership such as shared vision, communication, interactive relationships, community, guidance, and character are often strongly associated with individuals not in official positions of leadership but who are still viewed as model authorities.¹³⁶ Regarding terrorist leaders, Brian Jackson, whose previously cited research depicts the three types of authority a leader can have (e.g. strategic, operational, tactical), acknowledges that individuals can demonstrate authority through informal influence rather than formal control.¹³⁷ At the most strategic level, for example, informal jihadi leaders in Europe have broadcasted the ideological aims and objectives of the movement for global jihad. This was the case with Anjem Choudary, whose documentation as a material supporter of terrorism and his subsequent decapitation by arrest are discussed in this article’s case studies. On the other end are informal leaders with tactical influence who, for example, have provided leadership through real-time command-and-control of terrorist plots. This was the case with U.S. citizen Colleen LaRose (“Jihad Jane”) who was involved in recruiting co-conspirators for a plot to kill Swedish artist Lars Vilks. The case of her arrest and conviction is also subsequently illustrated. Since informal actors, such as individuals in networks or terrorist entrepreneurs, can invoke the equivalent leadership authorities of formal actors necessary to support and execute acts of terrorism, their inclusion in a new model for leadership decapitation makes the approach ever more holistic.

Chapter

04

A New Model for Leadership Targeting in Counterterrorism

In incorporating knowledge on the three levels of leadership targeting based on the nature of control or influence that terrorist leaders exert (strategic, operational, tactical) as well as the spectrum of actors which perpetrate terrorism (formal and informal actors), a holistic model for terrorist leadership targeting is generated. The interaction of these two variables is summarized in *Table 1*. Likewise, each category of leadership targeting is conceptualized in *Table 2* along with illustrations of past decapitations against members of al-Qaeda and individuals in the broader movement for global jihad. Several of these examples are illustrated in the subsequent case studies. In total, six types of leadership targeting are conceptualized:

- **Formal/Traditional Strategic Leadership Targeting**—Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary strategic control or influence over a formal terrorist organization. These leaders are identified as the topmost figureheads of their groups with the core responsibility of projecting the overall aims and objectives—either ideological or physical—of the organization and derive their authority from the allegiance of inferior group members. Formal strategic targeting might occur against political leaders, military leaders, or spiritual leaders. While typically they themselves do not directly engage in the planning or execution of operational or tactical activities, approval for certain activities usually requires their endorsement whether for religious, strategic, or other justifications.
- **Informal Strategic Leadership Targeting**—Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary strategic control or influence in an informal network or movement. While these individuals set similar ideological or physical objectives akin to formal leaders, their adherents are not subordinates in a terrorist organization. Instead, they address a broader milieu of networks, sympathizers, and political supporters. While informal strategic leadership targeting can occur against spiritual or community leaders, it cannot occur against political or military leaders because they do not hold these official capacities in formal organizations or state governments. Informal strategic leaders can offer endorsements of operational or tactical activities, however, as is the case for leaders in formal terrorist groups, their approval is not required.
- **Formal/Traditional Operational Leadership Targeting**—Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary operational control or influence in a formal terrorist organization. These individuals make the organization survive and thrive on a day-to-day basis. Their roles are expansive and touch a variety of operational environments and activities.

Decapitations in this class occur against plot (operational) commanders; recruiters and facilitators; training camp managers; financiers; weaponists; mechanical technicians; medical personnel; propagandists (especially media production artists); foreign liaisons; document forgers; intelligence officers; materials suppliers; and all types of logisticians. In other words, formal targeting against operational leadership effects the echelon of leaders responsible for specialized divisions of labor. What makes attacks against these leaders unique is the weakened linkages between strategic leader guidance and tactical leader execution. For instance, referring to counterterrorism actions against leaders responsible for planning and executing group operations, Mark Bowden notes that “unlike the organization’s most infamous leaders, the operations commander[s] had to be in constant touch with the group’s rank and file, plotting actions, moving money, and training recruits, and the more active [they] were the more likely it was that the American satellites, drones, or raiders would find [them].”¹³⁸ Formal operational leadership targeting causes the mid-tier personnel in the group to be in constant flux.

- **Informal Operational Leadership Targeting**—Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary operational control or influence in an informal network or movement. Like formal operational leadership targeting, this class of targeting occurs against individuals with specialized skills or responsibilities who are inspired to carry out the visions of strategic leaders. However, these individuals do not take direct orders from said superiors. Instead, they are inspired by propaganda, influenced by deep or personal ties, or are otherwise radicalized to carry out tasks that abet terrorism. For example, individuals in the West who independently take it upon themselves to recruit jihadists and facilitate their travel to theaters of combat would be eligible for informal operational leadership targeting.
- **Formal/Traditional Tactical Leadership Targeting**—Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary tactical control or influence in a formal terrorist organization. The most basic example is the killing or capture of an individual who is the on-the-ground commander of an active or soon to be active terrorist plot that is sponsored by an official terrorist group. The tactical leader would, for instance, be the authority on the timing and sequence of events in an attack. As a formal cell or field commander, he or she has been given the general guidance and approval for the plot from the strategic leaders in the terrorist organization and has been supported financially, logistically, or materially from the group’s operational leaders. But on the day of the event or short time leading up to it, the tactical leader’s decisions are the most crucial in determining the success of the terrorist attack. Thus, formal tactical leadership targeting will be effective if it disrupts an immediate threat.
- **Informal Tactical Leadership Targeting**—Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary tactical control or influence in an informal network or movement. Akin to formal tactical leaders, informal tactical leaders command the elements of basic terrorist plots. While

their plots can be ideologically inspired by notorious terrorist group leaders, they have no official linkages to formal terrorist organizations. Instead, their support is drawn from ideologues in the community and any necessary provisions are obtained from informal operational leaders (e.g. recruits, weapons, money, documents). As with formal/traditional tactical leadership targeting, the tactical leader's decisions are the most crucial in determining the success of a terrorist plot. Likewise, informal tactical leadership targeting is said to work when it disrupts an impending attack.

SPECTRUM OF TERRORIST ACTORS

		Formal Actors <i>(Terrorist and Insurgent Organizations)</i>	Informal Actors <i>(Informal Networks & Terrorist Entrepreneurs)</i>
LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP TARGETING	Strategic Targeting	Formal/Traditional Strategic Leadership Targeting	Informal Strategic Leadership Targeting
	Operational Targeting	Formal/Traditional Operational Leadership Targeting	Informal Operational Leadership Targeting
	Tactical Targeting	Formal/Traditional Tactical Leadership Targeting	Informal Tactical Leadership Targeting

Table 1. Typology of Terrorist Leadership Targeting

There are a few caveats associated with this approach. First, while this typology is meant to be exhaustive, categories of targeting are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On many occasions, terrorist leaders can exert more than one type of authoritative control or influence. This might especially be the case for smaller or younger groups where terrorist leaders retain full command and decision-making, at all levels, until the unit size expands, or intragroup trust leads to the delegation of authority. In these instances, leadership decapitations can have any combination of strategic, operational, or tactical consequences depending on a target's role in the organization or network. For example, the arrest of Aum Shinrikyo's highly domineering and controlling leader, Shoko Asahara, can be considered formal/traditional leadership decapitation at all three targeting levels. While Asahara surrounded himself with an inner circle of associates who helped him manage Aum Shinrikyo, he himself was the supreme leader in the organization and dictated all its aspects from its strategic ideological vision of a Japan free of corruption to its tactical plots such as the Sarin attack in the Tokyo subway.¹³⁹ The high degree of control Asahara held at all three levels could explain why the group collapsed relatively quickly following his arrest. Similarly, in the case of the killing of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader Anwar al-Awlaki, his removal may have had multi-level consequences. While it ultimately should be categorized as a formal operational leadership decapitation given his *primary* role organizing the group's external operations (such as his coordination of the attempted 2009 Christmas

“underwear bombing” plot and the 2010 cargo planes bomb plot), al-Awlaki was also a pivotal spiritual and ideological leader of the Yemen-based group. Thus, his death by a U.S. drone strike in 2011 likely also reverberated strategic consequences for AQAP.

Category of Leadership Targeting	Conceptualization	Al-Qaeda and Movement for Global Jihad Examples
Formal/Traditional Strategic Leadership Targeting	Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary strategic control or influence over a formal terrorist organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Killing of Osama bin Laden (Founder and emir, al-Qaeda) • Killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Founder and emir, al-Qaeda in Iraq) • Killing of Abu Basir Naser al-Wuhayshi (Emir, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) • Arrest of Riduan Isamuddin, “Hamabli” (Military commander, al-Qaeda linked group Jemaah Islamiyah)
Informal Strategic Leadership Targeting	Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary strategic control or influence in an informal network or movement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrest of Anjem Choudary (Founder and spiritual leader, Al-Muhajiroun, Islam4UK, and Sharia4 networks) • Arrest of Fouad Belkacem (Founder and spiritual leader, Sharia4Belgium network) • Arrest of Mohammed Achamlane (Founder and emir, Forsane Alizza network)
Formal/Traditional Operational Leadership Targeting	Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary operational control or influence in a formal terrorist organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrest of Khalid Sheik Muhammad (Operations commander, al-Qaeda) • Killing of Abu Khabab al-Masri (Chief bombmaker, al-Qaeda) • Arrest of Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri (Operations commander, al-Qaeda) • Killing of Anwar al-Awlaki (Propagandist and recruiter, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula)
Informal Operational Leadership Targeting	Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary operational control or influence in an informal network or movement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrest of Abu Hamza al-Masri (Propagandist and facilitator, Finsbury Park Mosque) • Arrest and deportation of Abu Qatada al-Filistini (Propagandist and facilitator, London-based networks) • Arrest of Younis Tsouli (Propagandist and Internet activist arrested for incitement to commit acts of terrorism)
Formal/Traditional Tactical Leadership Targeting	Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary tactical control or influence in a formal terrorist organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Killing of Qari Yasin (Afghanistan field commander, al-Qaeda) • Arrest of Ramzi bin al-Shibh (Cell Leader, al-Qaeda/Hamburg Cell) • Arrest of Najibullah Zazi (Field Commander, New York-based Al-Qaeda cell leader)
Informal Tactical Leadership Targeting	Any action which removes a terrorist leader who exerts primary tactical control or influence in an informal network or movement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrest of Colleen LaRose, “Jihad Jane” (U.S.-based conspirator in an unnamed global cell) • Arrest of Mohammed Bouyeri (Suspected cell leader, Hofstad network) • Arrest of Zakaria Amara (Suspected cell leader, 2006 Toronto plot)

Table 2. Terrorist leadership targeting in the context of al-Qaeda and the movement for global jihad

Second, while the categories of leadership targeting are static, targeted actors in the framework are dynamic. In terms of the levels of control or influence, some terrorists might start out as lower-tier leaders in tactical or operational domains then, after years of experience or following deficits in top-level officers, evolve into higher valued leaders with strategic roles. On the other hand, strategic or operational leaders could also choose to specialize in supportive tasks or terrorist operations reserved for mid-to-low tier personnel. Furthermore, the boundary between membership in formal groups and participation in informal networks is equally fluid. Over time, known terrorist leaders might dissociate from formal organizations but remain independently involved in terrorist networks or movements. For instance, Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi was an official spiritual advisor for al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, following his fallout with AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi over the latter's indiscriminate methods, al-Maqqisi elected to remain unaffiliated. Instead, he informally supports the global movement by preaching Salafism and jihadism through his innovative online forum *al-Tawheed*. As a result, al-Maqqisi has been called "one of the most influential jihadi ideologues."¹⁴⁰ Alternatively, informal actors can also materialize into formal ones as was the case previously discussed with Khalid Sheikh Muhammad. Before KSM formally swore *bayah* to Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, he was an autonomous entrepreneur; a terrorist 'freelancer' fascinated with carrying out innovative plots involving hijacked aircraft. All of this is to say that when considering the position of terrorists in the formulation of a leadership decapitation strategy, targeted individuals are not forever confined to one class of leadership or another. For this framework to be effective, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to consider what the target has done or who the target was affiliated with in the past. More important, for the purpose of this argument, is what the leader's responsibilities and personal connections are in the present or will be in the future.

Finally, to reiterate, the spectrum of actors component in this typology is uniquely modeled for the current wave in terrorism perpetuated by Islamic extremists. To this author's knowledge, since informal terrorist actors are not featured—at least significantly—in other modern-day terrorist campaigns, the framework is only meant for counterterrorism efforts against the movement for global jihad. If threats driven by other ideologies arise in the future, then security experts can either ignore or incorporate the spectrum of actors approach depending on the nature and structure of the terrorist operational environment.

Chapter

05

Leadership Targeting in Action: Case Studies from al-Qaeda and the Movement for Global Jihad

The following section draws on several case studies to illustrate the application of the leadership targeting model to Western counterterrorism strategy. The cases represent the entire range of types of leadership control or influence, from the strategic to the tactical, and its context in leadership across both formal and informal terrorist actors. The cases of targeting against formal terrorist actors exclusively cover leaders affiliated with the al-Qaeda organization, the principal group that has internalized and broadcasted the global Islamist ideology. Alternatively, studies of targeting against informal terrorist actors highlight the role of decapitation against jihadi leaders without al-Qaeda membership or affiliation in other recognized foreign terrorist organizations.¹⁴¹ Consequently, these cases are represented by arrests of leaders in informal jihadi networks.

The cases of decapitation involving leaders of informal networks present a minor challenge. Whereas the U.S. State Department may not proscribe select entities abroad as official terrorist organizations, the host government may otherwise pursue certain designation policies. For instance, whereas the United Kingdom Home Office officially recognizes The Saved Sect/al-Ghurabaa (an Islamist group which seeks to establish a Muslim Caliphate, also known as “al Muhajiroun,” “Islam4UK,” “Islamic Path” and “Need4Khilafah”) as a terrorist organization,¹⁴² the U.S. State Department does not follow suit. In instances of policy disagreement, the case studies defer to two guidelines. First, the entity in question is considered an organization only if it meets Martha Crenshaw’s criteria for terrorist groups.¹⁴³ Since al-Muhajiroun hardly resorts to the structure, operating procedures, or activities of formal groups like al-Qaeda, it is classified as a network of informal actors. Second, what is most important is the context of an individual’s leadership immediately preceding his or her removal. For example, in the case of the Islam4UK’s leader Anjem Choudary, his arrest would not be considered a formal decapitation even though it was a response to his pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, a formal group. Scotland Yard had rifled for nearly 20 years to find prosecutable evidence related to Choudary’s activities with Islam4UK and its various spinoffs. Thus, his leadership removal is far more likely to have consequences for the ongoing operations and survival of his former network than for the operations and survival of the Islamic State.

The case studies selected include Osama bin Laden, the founding leader of al-Qaeda killed in an American raid in 2011; Anjem Choudary, the founder and spiritual advisor for Islam4UK and

its British offshoot networks and related European affiliates, jailed in 2016 for his activities supporting the Islamic State; Abu Khabab al-Masri, al-Qaeda's chief bombmaker and top chemical and biological weapons expert, killed in a drone strike in 2008; Abu Hamza al-Masri, a radical cleric at the London-based Finsbury Park Mosque, arrested in the U.K. and sentenced in the U.S. for his involvement in terrorist activities; Najibullah Zazi, a U.S.-based al-Qaeda cell leader arrested in 2009 for planning plots against the New York subway; and Colleen LaRose, arrested in 2009 as an American recruiter of an international terrorist cell and directly involved in an assassination plot.

Each case study follows a similar format. A brief background on the leader, their organization or network and associated plots, and details related to the leader's decapitation are first presented. This is followed by an account of why the leader falls in the corresponding class of the leadership targeting framework. Each case presents the public evidence and explains why the leader is mostly considered a strategic, operational, or tactical figure as well as why the leader falls in the formal or informal class of actors. However, what is intentionally absent is an analysis of each decapitation's effect on subsequent rates of terrorism. This is because the goal of the case studies is to familiarize readers with how past targeting attempts—and ultimately future ones—fit into the conceptual framework. As stated in this article's conclusion, wider attempts to quantify terrorism data in the context of the new model should be the direction of future research.

The author acknowledges the possible limitations both for the use of case studies and for the application of the framework in future scholarship. First, inherent in the case study methodology is the problem of generalizability. The study recognizes that use of this model is reserved for counterterrorist campaigns against movements with a spectrum of actors such as the movement for global jihad. Second, the article provides six case studies, one study per targeting category. Some might argue that this number is too small to demonstrate the relevance of the framework. On these limitations, however, the case study approach offers qualitative depth into the practice of leadership targeting that other approaches cannot provide. Indeed, case study analysis is the most logical tool since this article's purpose is to present an original conceptual blueprint rather than provide any argument for or against leadership targeting.

Third, analysis of each jihadi leader is only limited to information from open sources. Each classification is based on media accounts of the leaders' activities, government reports, legal documents, and other publicly available materials. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that there is classified information unavailable to researchers which would otherwise alter a terrorist leader's criticality in a group or movement. Lacking this intelligence, it is possible that researchers employing this model might over or understate the strategic, operational, or tactical importance of certain terrorist leaders or even misjudge their affiliation in formal groups. Finally, classifying

terrorist targeting is almost entirely dependent on the researcher's objectivity. Whereas one researcher might conclude that a decapitation falls in a certain category based on 'X' evidence, another researcher may conclude differently if presented with the same information or if given access to additional 'Y' sources. Consequently, this study errs on the side of caution by selecting cases where information is completely public and has been corroborated by media, government, and academic sources.

Case Study #1: Formal Strategic Leadership Targeting—The Killing of Osama bin Laden

The killing of Osama Bin Laden best demonstrates formal strategic leadership targeting. On May 2, 2011, a joint U.S. C.I.A.-Navy SEAL team stormed Osama bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan, killing him in the process. Detainee reporting from Bin Laden's network of affiliates led intelligence officials to the mysterious compound in Pakistan.

Bin Laden, the internationally recognized leader of al-Qaeda (AQ), was implicated in a host of violent jihadi activities against the United States and the West. Throughout his nearly 30 years of jihad, Bin Laden oversaw several global terrorist attacks, established a financial and operational empire of al-Qaeda affiliated entities, and unified like-minded Islamist extremist groups across the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Asia.¹⁴⁴ Following the victory of the mujahideen over the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1989, Bin Laden, alongside the Palestinian cleric Abdullah Azzam, consolidated the remaining Arab and Muslim foreign fighters into an international "vanguard of elite fighters" ready to deploy worldwide in the defense of Muslims.¹⁴⁵ His organization became known as al-Qaeda ("the base") and his followers pledged their allegiance to him as its first emir. Among their infamous terrorist activities, Bin Laden and several AQ co-conspirators were either indicted or implicated for their involvement in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam;¹⁴⁶ the 2000 U.S.S. Cole bombing;¹⁴⁷ and most notoriously, the September 11, 2001 airline attacks in Washington, New York, and Pennsylvania.

The 2011 U.S. raid which killed Osama bin Laden would appropriately be considered a case of formal strategic leadership targeting. In terms of the level of targeting based on Bin Laden's degree of control or influence, the decapitation was mainly of strategic effect, although it might have reverberated some operational consequences for AQ as well. This was a result of Bin Laden's role as the conductor of al-Qaeda's guiding ideology and as the chief visionary for how AQ's ideology was applied in practice. Al-Qaeda's version of global Islamist ideology was not novel; it was cultivated over the years from the teachings of early Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood scholars. This ideology was "rooted in the legacies of 'Azzam and the Saudi opposition" who warned of a relentless "western" or "cultural" attack against Islam.¹⁴⁸ Even though he lacked the official religious credentials, Bin Laden viewed his role as the purveyor of

global Islamist ideology. Indeed, he believed he was called upon “to follow in the footsteps of the Messenger and to communicate his message to all nations.”¹⁴⁹

Bin Laden’s popularity as emir emerged from his ability to transform al-Qaeda’s Islamist vision into strategic action. Bin Laden believed that local jihadi groups in the region were too focused on the overthrow of local regimes or the State of Israel. Instead, his distinctive appeal derived from his vision to attack the United States—what he called “the head of the snake”¹⁵⁰—which he identified as the root of all social, economic, and political problems in the Muslim world. As a consequence, this “far enemy” approach came to define how Bin Laden gained strategic control of the global jihad. In pursuit of global Islamism, he set the overall anti-Western objectives of the movement through his various fatwas and communications to al-Qaeda’s operatives and the wider radical Muslim population. For example, his 1998 fatwa titled the “World Islamic Front Statement” articulates al-Qaeda’s strategy for action: “the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.”¹⁵¹ The al-Qaeda leader subsequently reaffirmed that “we do not differentiate between those dressed in military uniforms and civilians; they are all targets in this fatwa.”¹⁵² His relentless focus on targeting the “far enemy” is a consistent theme in al-Qaeda’s media publications.¹⁵³ Bin Laden’s strategic influence and control over the group’s outcome goals ultimately translated to al-Qaeda’s global terrorist presence.

While this analysis argues that Bin Laden was primarily a strategic leader for al-Qaeda and deserves classification in the strategic level of targeting, there is no doubt he was involved to some extent in an operational capacity, especially through his contributions to attack planning, fundraising, and alliance-building. His personal wealth allowed him to fund al-Qaeda’s plots and the select operations of external jihadi groups; to construct training camps; and to sponsor the travel of foreign fighters to areas of conflict. Even while in hiding until his death, Bin Laden was directly involved in certifying various plots and targets as well as approving al-Qaeda mergers and alliances. Documents seized from Bin Laden’s hideout in Abbottabad demonstrate that he was still “involved in both al-Qaeda’s day-to-day operations and long-term strategy.”¹⁵⁴

Regarding the spectrum of actors approach, it is pretty clear that Bin Laden represents a formal actor given his leadership in an official terrorist organization. Since al-Qaeda meets the four requirements of a terrorist group, counterterrorism decapitations against its leadership should be considered formal/traditional. The intersection of the strategic level of targeting with the formal agency of the targeted actor makes the Bin Laden raid a classic case of formal strategic leadership targeting.

Case Study #2: Informal Strategic Leadership Targeting – The Arrest of Anjem Choudary

As opposed to the killing of Osama bin Laden, the arrest of the British imam Anjem Choudary represents a case of non-organizational leadership decapitation, although still at the strategic level of targeting. Choudary, an Islamic preacher in the United Kingdom, was arrested in 2014 then convicted and imprisoned in 2016 for inviting his followers to support the Islamic State.¹⁵⁵ Formerly a co-founder of the London-based al-Muhajiroun network, Choudary subsequently became the ideological leader of Islam4UK as well as a spiritual and strategic advisor for other extremist networks across Europe. Several members of Choudary's networks have either been implicated or directly involved in terrorist attacks in Europe and the West and have travelled to fight for terrorist groups in conflict regions such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Following his arrest, the U.S. State Department designated Choudary a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT).¹⁵⁶

Anjem Choudary, London-born and of Pakistani descent, made an extensive career as a militant Islamic ideologue professing the teachings of Salafism and jihadism. Though British-based, Choudary's influence in the movement for global jihad was transnational. In an insightful analysis of Choudary and his networks, Assaf Moghadam argues that following the 7/7 attacks in London, "Choudary gradually became the most well known, and one of the most controversial, activists associated with the British, as well as the broader European Salafist and Jihadist scene."¹⁵⁷ A report by the British-based *HOPE Not Hate* organization labeled Choudary the "single biggest gateway to terrorism in British history."¹⁵⁸

Anjem Choudary originally co-founded the al-Muhajiroun (AM) network alongside the Salafist and jihadi activist Omar Bakri Muhammad. Under the leadership of Bakri and Choudary, the network grew in unthinkable size. Reigning in members from Bakri's former organization, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), AM became the most influential Islamist movement in the U.K.¹⁵⁹ Unlike other British Islamic activist networks such as HT, AM was known for its confrontational and provocative publicity stunts.¹⁶⁰ These were meant to sow fear and divisiveness in the British population. However, following the London bombings of July 2005 which were revealed to be tied to members of AM, Bakri fled to Lebanon before the U.K. Home Office proscribed the group and barred him from returning.¹⁶¹ This backdrop set the stage for Anjem Choudary to take on the reigns of the movement becoming the unencumbered, ideological and strategic leader of al-Muhajiroun's successor groups. It also paved way for his connection to a host of jihadi Islamist networks across Europe and around the globe.

Anjem Choudary's success as the strategic leader of the U.K.'s jihadist underworld extended from his ability to vocalize the ideological aims of the movement and from his maneuvering a tight-rope approach between legitimate activism and illicit activities. On the ideological end,

Choudary envisioned Islam4UK as having “been established by sincere Muslims as a platform to propagate the supreme Islamic ideology within the United Kingdom as a divine alternative to man-made law.”¹⁶² Although his official position did not include the violent overthrow of the British government, Choudary did believe in changing the country’s opinion in favor of Islam and transferring the authority of the U.K. government to Muslims to implement *Sharia* (Islamic jurisprudence). He envisioned the establishment of a Caliphate in Britain that would apply Islamic doctrine to its domestic and foreign policies. Moreover, it was in or around 2010 that Choudary began to export his ideology and foster connections with networks in other countries.¹⁶³ Foreign networks slowly adopted Choudary’s vision for implementing their own Caliphates in Europe and elsewhere—these entities collectively became known as the “Sharia4 movement.”¹⁶⁴ For example, the Belgian brand of the movement, Sharia4Belgium, copied much of the rhetoric and ideological positions of Choudary’s Islam4UK. Its spiritual leader Fouad Belkacem is said to have accepted ideological training, strategic guidance, and even some degree of operational support from Choudary directly.¹⁶⁵

Anjem Choudary’s position as Islam4UK’s strategic-level leader also flowed from his ability to effectively walk the line between legally protected and illegally sanctioned activities. Choudary envisioned Islam4UK’s activities as confrontational and appalling. He was genius in developing rabble-rousing rhetoric and activities that could be permitted under U.K. law. For example, in 2009 Choudary called for Buckingham Palace to be the seat of the new caliph and for the Queen to wear a full burqa.¹⁶⁶ In 2010, Islam4UK announced a protest in Royal Wootton Bassett, the English town popular for its military funeral repatriations.¹⁶⁷ Although the group’s plan to carry black coffins and display slogans disparaging British soldiers did not transpire, Choudary was pleased by the amount of global attention brought to the protest’s announcement. Again in 2011, Islam4UK and its affiliate Muslims Against Crusades (MAC) called for the establishment of “Sharia-controlled zones” around Britain. British media reported thousands of posted signs and leaflets which read “You are entering a Sharia-controlled zone – Islamic rules enforced” and which prohibited alcohol, gambling, prostitution, and other anti-Islamic activities.¹⁶⁸ While these activities are not existential threats to Britain’s national security, the high level of attention given to them by the media played into Choudary’s strategy. Indeed, the resulting rise of right-wing counter groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) allowed Choudary to reaffirm the narrative that Islam is under a western attack and, consequently, to recruit more individuals into his network. Choudary’s personal charisma and his ability to inflame the passions of Britain’s citizens defined his role as a strategic leader in the movement.

The arrest of Anjem Choudary represents an informal leadership decapitation due to his lack of any publicly known affiliations with formal terrorist organizations. While Choudary has publicly praised al-Qaeda, its leaders and its plots,¹⁶⁹ the author is unaware of any pre-conviction ties to al-Qaeda or swears of bayah to its leaders. Although there is no doubt that several of his

followers have crossed the threshold into terrorist activities or have even joined foreign terrorist groups, Choudary has always—at least until his arrest—managed to remain one step removed. It was only until his oath of allegiance to the Islamic State that analysts described Choudary as an instrumental “jihadi entrepreneur,”¹⁷⁰ one with the ability to independently control or influence the movement for global jihad’s objectives in Britain. Thus, this act of informal strategic leadership targeting could represent a turning point for jihadi activities in the U.K. and beyond.

Case Study #3: Formal Operational Leadership Targeting—The Killing of Abu Khabab al-Masri

Abu Khabab (Midhat Mursi al- Sayyid ‘Umar) al-Masri was killed by a U.S. missile strike at a village in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).¹⁷¹ With a \$5 million bounty on his head, al-Masri was a top al-Qaeda bomb technician and experimenter who explored the use of chemical and biological weapons. A trained chemist from Egypt, al-Masri originally joined Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) in the early 1980s prior to entering al-Qaeda during their merger the following decade. Al-Masri participated in the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan where he helped to set up the Derunta Camp complex. According to Western sources, Derunta was where al-Masri explored the weaponization of chemical and biological agents and where he trained notable al-Qaeda operatives.¹⁷² Al-Masri was directly charged with overseeing al-Qaeda’s formal CBRN weapons program “Project al-Zabadi” (translated Project Yoghurt). At his lab at the Derunta Camp, al-Masri tested the use of nerve agents from insecticides and chemical products such as cyanide, while taping his experiments on live, caged animals for the world to view.¹⁷³

Al-Masri’s killing is an example of formal operational leadership targeting due to his role as a mid-level terrorist operative in the established al-Qaeda organization. Al-Masri derived his operational leadership authority through his expertise in weapons and engineering. Using the official capacity vested in him by al-Qaeda’s senior elite, he used his authority to exert influence on subordinate trainees. Some of his trainees are well known for international plots and incidents. In 1995, Islamist militants tied to EIJ detonated two car bombs nearly destroying the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad.¹⁷⁴ The bombings killed 15 and wounded 59 others. The attack was viewed as EIJ’s response to the Mubarak government’s crackdown on Islamist militant attacks in Egypt.

Experts believe that al-Masri helped train the suicide bombers who attacked the USS Cole in 2000 and that he assisted “shoe-bomber” Richard Reid in 2001.¹⁷⁵ The group of operatives in Yemen who carried out the bombings of the USS Cole in the Port of Aden are believed to have trained at al-Masri’s Derunta camp in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁶ In the case of the December 2001 “shoe-bomber,” police arrested British citizen Richard Reid after he attempted to detonate an explosive on a transatlantic flight from Paris to Miami. Reid is believed to have been equipped

by al-Masri and is also alleged to have trained in the Derunta camp in the 1990s under al-Masri's instruction.¹⁷⁷

Other notable links include “millennium bomber” Ahmed Ressam and other would-be terrorists in Europe. In 1999, Ressam was arrested in Port Angeles, Washington state while en route to his final target Los Angeles International Airport. Ressam used his skills gained from al-Masri to build explosives in Canada which he intended to transport down the US western coast.¹⁷⁸ In 2003, following a wave of arrests in France, the UK, Italy, and Spain, investigators alleged that several Islamic terrorist cells were planning the use of chemical and biological weapons. The investigators believed that some of the men arrested in Europe attended al-Masri's training camp in Afghanistan and received instruction with cyanide and other weapons of mass destruction.¹⁷⁹

From the spectrum of actors approach, it is definitively clear that Abu Khabab al-Masri is a formal terrorist actor whose authority is derived from his membership in a recognized terrorist organization— first by his affiliation in Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and second, by virtue of his oath to al-Qaeda core. When al-Masri was targeted in by the United States in 2008, he was still a full-term member of the official, albeit scattered, organization in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal regions. Therefore, the case of his killing should be classified as an instance of formal operational leadership targeting.

Case Study #4: Informal Operational Leadership Targeting— The Arrest of Abu Hamza al-Masri

On the other hand, informal operational leadership targeting is demonstrated by the arrest of Abu Hamza al-Masri (Mostafa Kamel Mostafa). Abu Hamza (no known relation to Abu-Khabab al-Masri) is an Egyptian-born British citizen and U.S. and U.N.-sanctioned terrorist associated with al-Qaeda; however, there is no public evidence to suggest his direct participation in and formal affiliation with the al-Qaeda terrorist.¹⁸⁰ With an extensive résumé of providing material and ideological support for global jihadi activities, Abu Hamza was arrested in the United Kingdom in 2004 following his turn as imam and preacher of the Finsbury Park mosque in London. Abu Hamza was simultaneously indicted by the United States in 2004 for charges of supporting terrorist activities in the U.S. homeland and abroad. He was extradited from the U.K. in October 2012 and sentenced to life imprisonment in May 2014 by a Manhattan federal court.¹⁸¹

The arrest of Abu Hamza al-Masri is treated as a case of informal operational leadership targeting given his history of navigating the jihadi operational environment just short of formal membership in a terrorist organization. Similar to the modus operandi of jihadi spiritual leader Anjem Choudary in the second case study, al-Masri appealed to the radical Islamist milieu in the

United Kingdom and beyond. A key recruiter, propagandist, and facilitator of jihadist foreign fighters, Abu Hamza derived his authority from his knowledge of Islamic fundamentalism and from his longstanding record of supporting the global movement. In 1987, al-Masri left the UK to meet with Abdullah Azzam, then spiritual leader of the Afghan Mujahideen movement. It was under Azzam's influence that al-Masri travelled to Afghanistan in 1991 to support anti-Soviet activities.¹⁸² In 1995, he travelled to Bosnia to fight alongside the Bosniaks against the Serbs and Croats.¹⁸³ Upon his return to the UK in the mid-1990s, Abu Hamza gained notoriety and influence as lead cleric of the Finsbury Park mosque where he delivered weekly sermons often inciting racial hatred and other criminal or terroristic offenses. In recordings of sermons recovered by British police, Hamza declared the lawfulness of "Killing a Kafir [non-believer] for any reason, you can say it's okay, even if there is no reason for it."¹⁸⁴ His sermons often exhorted his followers to attack the enemies of Islam. In numerous speeches he praised the men who led successful plots including the USS Cole Bombing and the September 11th attacks.¹⁸⁵ Several conspirators, both successful and interdicted, previously attended Hamza's Finsbury sermons including "shoe-bomber" Richard Reid, 9/11 plotter Zacharias Moussoui, and July 7 London bombers Mohammad Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, and Germaine Lindsay.¹⁸⁶

The American indictment of Abu Hamza al-Masri offers further proof of his role as an operational, informal terrorist leader in the movement for global jihad. In line with this article's definition of informal operational leadership where individuals use specific skills or functions to support strategic objectives without official tasking, Hamza has provided both material and rhetorical support for the facilitation of jihadi activities in the U.S. homeland and abroad. In December 1998, hostage-takers in Yemen stormed a caravan carrying 16 passengers including two U.S. citizens. Prior to the attack, Abu Hamza provided the lead hostage taker with a satellite telephone which he used to communicate with the group both the night before and during the hostage crisis. Hamza provided advice to the leader and offered to act as an intermediary on behalf of the hostage-takers. During the Yemeni military's subsequent operation to free the hostages, four people were killed.¹⁸⁷ As a result of his material support, the U.S. Treasury Department eventually listed him as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT).¹⁸⁸

From October 1999 to early 2000, Abu Hamza led the development of a jihad training camp in Bly, Oregon. Hamza and other conspirators stockpiled weapons and other munitions for use in the United States. The purpose of the camp was to provide various types of terrorist training including on the use of weapons for recruits who would become foreign fighters. He dispatched at least two of his followers, Oussama Abdullah Kassir and Haroon Rashid Aswat, to the Oregon camp. They were subsequently arrested.¹⁸⁹ Again, from mid-2000 to 2001, he provided material support and other resources to facilitate the travel of a follower to an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. Abu Hamza directly communicated with operatives both in London and Afghanistan to ensure the safe travel of his follower to an al-Qaeda camp.¹⁹⁰

Since Abu Hamza al-Masri never publicly swore allegiance to al-Qaeda and since no evidence exists that he held any type of formal leadership rank or position, it cannot be concluded that he belonged under the organization's formal control. Unlike the authority or influence bestowed upon other al-Qaeda figures such as Abu Khabab al-Masri or Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Hamza was an agent of terrorism by self-appointment. While he certainly was inspired by the strategic vision set forth by al-Qaeda's forefathers, Hamza's authority to provide operational expertise was derived from his individual entrepreneurial approach. The leadership he provided was to the broader informal network of jihadi followers in the West and not to the al-Qaeda organization itself. A significant case of informal operational leadership targeting, the U.S./U.K. decision to indict and arrest Abu Hamza was motivated by the threat he posed to each nation.

Case Study #5: Formal Tactical Leadership Targeting – The Arrest of Najibullah Zazi

The final two case studies demonstrate leadership targeting of terrorists at the most basic level of control or influence. As formulated in this article, terrorist leaders with formal tactical control are the “on-the-ground commanders” of active or soon-to-be active plots sponsored or directed by organized terrorist groups. The success of these plots is a direct function of the tactical leader's ability to command-and-control the events and circumstances related to the attack. In the case of Najibullah Zazi, formal tactical leadership targeting was used to disrupt an impending plot on the New York City subway system. In September 2009, the U.S. Justice Department indicted Zazi on the conspiracy to employ weapons of mass destruction against U.S. citizens in support of al-Qaeda.¹⁹¹ He and several co-conspirators were arrested as part of an al-Qaeda Denver and New York City based cell.

Najibullah Zazi was born in Eastern Afghanistan but spent most of his childhood in Peshawar, Pakistan.¹⁹² Zazi and his family moved to Queens, New York in 1999 where he worked and attended high school, although eventually dropping out. He befriended schoolmates Adis Medunjanin and Zarein Ahmedzay who encouraged him to participate in religious activities. Through Medunjanin and Ahmedzay, Najibullah became acquainted with the teachings of AQAP spiritual leader Anwar al-Awlaki whose “message was Jihad, to become a fighter against the United States to defend Afghanistan.”¹⁹³ After viewing hundreds of al-Awlaki's internet-based lectures, Zazi committed to the jihadist cause against the United States. According to court records, Zazi and his co-conspirators Medunjanin and Ahmedzay travelled to Peshawar in 2008 with the intention of joining the Taliban in its fight against U.S. and allied forces.¹⁹⁴ In Pakistan, al-Qaeda members took the group to a camp in Waziristan where they received military-type training with AK-47s, suicide belts, grenades and homemade explosive devices.¹⁹⁵ Following training, Zazi's cell returned to the United States in 2009 to facilitate an operation.

Al-Qaeda operational trainers in Afghanistan granted Najibullah Zazi his leadership role on the basis of his knowledge of jihadi favored tactics and of the target under consideration. Zazi demonstrated tactical level leadership as the chief facilitator of the New York City subway plot. He designed every aspect of the plan from its timing and exact location to the intelligence gathering and preparation of explosive ordnances. Under the cover of living with family in Denver, Zazi rented a local motel room where mixed ingredients for explosives purchased from around town. Zazi referenced bomb-making notes taken during his time in the training camps. His notes instructed on the procurement of ingredients for Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP), the explosive compound used in al-Qaeda plots such as the 2001 “shoe-bombing” and the 2005 London train bombings.¹⁹⁶ Zazi developed the compound from products collected at nearby beauty salon and home improvement stores. Zazi also took several trips to New York to meet with his co-conspirators where they scouted the location and discussed the sequence of events and timing of execution.¹⁹⁷ Throughout the planning phase and in the days leading up to the attack, Zazi secretly communicated in code with his foreign al-Qaeda handlers to seek guidance on the operation and to confirm its green light.¹⁹⁸

Najibullah’s arrest is a clear case of formal targeting given his admitted role as a prescribed member of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization. At his sentencing hearing, Zazi stated that his original intention for travelling to Pakistan was to join the Taliban. However, he and his cell were spotted and eventually recruited by al-Qaeda external operations members. He disclosed that “During the training, Al Qaeda leaders asked us to return to the United States and conduct martyrdom operation [sic]. We agreed to this plan. I did so because of my feelings about what the United States was doing in Afghanistan.”¹⁹⁹ He further admitted that al-Qaeda leaders actively discussed and selected U.S. target locations such as New York City subways. Subsequent FBI investigations and indictments reveal that the plot was directly organized by Pakistan-based “Saleh al-Somali, Rashid Rauf, and [Adnan] El Shukrijumah, who were then-leaders of al-Qaeda’s ‘external operations’ program dedicated to terrorist attacks in the United States and other Western countries.”²⁰⁰ As part of al-Qaeda’s global team, the three were responsible for planning and approving recruits for Western plots such as Zazi’s NYC subway operation and a connected bombing of a shopping mall in Manchester, UK. On his trip to Pakistan, Zazi also offered material support to al-Qaeda when he provided money and computers to its members.²⁰¹ Thus, unlike an informal terrorist leader whose activities and/or plots are self-guided and independent of external force, Najibullah Zazi’s plan was directed at the behest of operatives in the formal al-Qaeda organization. In disrupting the immediate threat to New York City, U.S. law enforcement’s use of formal tactical leadership targeting demonstrates this tool’s application when used against leaders whose decisions are the most crucial in determining the conduct of the terrorist attack.

Case Study #6: Informal Tactical Leadership Targeting—The Arrest of Colleen LaRose

The arrest of Colleen LaRose represents a similar instance of tactical leadership targeting albeit when used against an informal terrorist actor. The FBI arrested Colleen LaRose (“Jihad Jane”, “Fatima LaRose”) in March 2010 and charged her for an attempt to recruit jihadist fighters abroad and to assassinate a foreign citizen.²⁰² Similar to Najibullah Zazi at the tactical level, LaRose aspired to execute a plot and to engage in other terrorism related activities; however, unlike Zazi’s al-Qaeda directed and sponsored attack, LaRose acted independent of a formal organization. She was an entrepreneur operating outside the bounds of external agency.

This case of leadership targeting underscores the evolving nature of the security threat, that is, the seemingly innocuous but covertly self-radicalized perpetrators of terrorist acts. Colleen LaRose was U.S.-born. She had blonde hair, white skin, and an American passport, far from U.S. authorities’ perception of a terrorist operative but exactly the type of person sought after to conduct an unsuspecting attack. According to first-hand accounts, LaRose suffered an abusive upbringing. At age three her parents divorced and by thirteen she was a prostitute on the streets. LaRose and her sister were the victims of their father’s incest, rape, and other physical and emotional abuse. With a 7th grade education, she surrendered her life to drinking and drugs, once attempted suicide, and would marry multiple partners over her lifetime.²⁰³

From her home in a small Pennsylvanian town, LaRose, 47, was an active Internet user with multiple online accounts. It is unclear at what point in her life she converted to Islam and became drawn to Muslim extremist causes, but court documents indicate that LaRose used the online monikers “Jihad Jane” and “Fatima LaRose” to express her desire for participation in jihad. In one example, she posted a YouTube comment under the “Jihad Jane” username stating that she was “desperate to do something somehow to help” lessen the suffering of Muslim people.²⁰⁴ In other email communications with co-conspirators, LaRose sent messages indicating her aspiration to wage jihad and become a “shahed” (martyr). She used Internet sites to solicit funds for terrorism and to recruit accomplices across the U.S. and Asia for travel to Europe. Finally, in the ultimate declaration of her role in an assassination plot, LaRose pronounced her intention to locate and murder a resident of Sweden asserting to “make it my goal till I achieve it or die trying.”²⁰⁵

With respect to her level of leadership, Colleen LaRose derived her tactical authority from her role as principal facilitator of the assassination cell. The target of LaRose’s murder plot was Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks who offended Muslims by depicting the prophet Muhammad on the body of a dog.²⁰⁶ According to court records, LaRose attempted to provide stolen passport documents to enable the travel of jihadists from South Asia to Europe. Using terrorist websites and other means of communication, she articulated her intentions and plans for the

assassination to her international collaborators.²⁰⁷ The Internet provided the means for LaRose to communicate logistics to the cell including instructions for “martyring themselves, soliciting funds for terrorists, soliciting passports and avoiding travel restrictions (through the collection of passports and through marriage) in order to wage violent jihad.”²⁰⁸ She further facilitated the travel of an American female accomplice from Colorado to Europe. While travelling and training in Europe, LaRose joined online communities hosted by Vilks where she gathered intelligence and indicators to locate her target. As is the result of tactical leadership targeting, the plot was interdicted when the FBI, in coordination with the international captures of co-conspirators in Europe, arrested LaRose on a return to Philadelphia.

Colleen LaRose is classified as an informal leader since she was not a prescribed member of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization. As demonstrated, LaRose was a homegrown violent extremist whose entrepreneurial use of the Internet enabled her contribution to global jihadi activities. While some reports suggest she was enticed or “ordered” by a foreign extremist named Ali Damache (subsequently convicted for his role in the plot), no public evidence establishes formal affiliation between al-Qaeda and any of these conspirators. Even the arrest of Damache would be categorized as informal leadership targeting given his lack of ties to illicit terrorist groups.²⁰⁹

Conclusion

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Conclusion: Implications for Research and Policy

A signature counterterrorism policy spanning three presidential administrations, leadership targeting is likely to remain a cornerstone of the U.S. military arsenal in the fight against global extremism. This article underscores the need for evaluating decapitation's effectiveness in disrupting or destroying terrorist groups or movements. Through a critical look at past attempts to gauge successful use, the article has made an original contribution by arguing for a new approach towards empirical research. This approach matches three distinct levels of leadership across the spectrum of formal and informal actors in today's terrorist ecosystem. As the examples of attempts against al-Qaeda and the movement for global jihad demonstrate, decapitation actions—whether through targeted killings or arrests—can be classified into six categories. The outcome is a framework which provides investigators with identifiable and measurable targeting datasets.

This article makes clear that the proposed framework is not an argument for or against the effectiveness of leadership targeting. However, the implications for future research are clear. New studies should apply this model to answer questions about decapitation when analyzing diverse variables or testing certain metrics for measurement. For instance, does leadership targeting at one level of action have a greater effect on terrorism's decline than leadership targeting at another (e.g. strategic vs. operational)? When does terrorist ideology matter? Is it better to capture or kill terrorist leaders in any category? At what level of leadership targeting are changes in measurements significant (e.g. frequency of attacks, lethality of attacks)? Several of these questions are drawn from the original problem sets outlined in this article's literature review. Consequently, in addition to new research, scholars should revisit past studies and apply the leadership targeting model to those datasets.

As for policymakers, national leaders should not be quick to dismiss leadership targeting as an effective approach in counterterrorism; but they should neither be hasty in its adoption. Before claims of effectiveness can be made, the intelligence and law enforcement communities must first collect more data on terrorist leaders. They must do so while keeping under consideration the levels of terrorist leadership and the spectrum of actors. Intelligence collection requirements need to access the command-and-control dynamics of leaders in terrorist organizations or networks. Second, researchers need to know the activities and roles specific terrorists play in organizations or networks in order to better classify and study them. This means that intelligence agencies must be willing to share more information with academia on the identities

of terrorist leaders while continuing to protect sensitive or classified data. Consequently, increased knowledge should lead to more accurate studies which in turn, will better inform the development of national and military policy objectives. For all its considerations, leadership targeting will remain a key component of U.S. strategy in the near future. Only through methodical approaches can we determine if it should.

References

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¹ Leadership targeting is not to be confused with “drone strikes” or “targeted killing.” The three are often conflated which causes considerable methodological challenges for research. Leadership targeting—used interchangeably with *leadership decapitation*—includes either the death (targeted killing) or arrest (targeted capture) of individuals who are previously known to authorities. The use of unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones, is one tactic for killing sought after terrorists; however, as a technical tool and not a policy, drones are also used by military forces in conventional armed conflict.

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⁹⁶ S. Clinton Hinote, *Cutting Off the Head of the Snake: Applying and Assessing Leadership Attack in Military Conflict* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Air University, 2013), 17-32; Hinote seeks to distinguish between attacking enemy leadership and attacking enemy leaders. While the former refers to attacking the command structures and systems that support adversary leaders, the latter refers to leadership decapitation such as through killing or capturing individuals. As for adopting the levels of warfare into the research methodology, Hinote states that “these levels of war will be useful in this study because they offer an important way to classify how leadership is being attacked or what effects attacks at certain levels may have.”

⁹⁷ The concept of mission command refers to the way that U.S. military commanders specify mission objectives in need of completion by subordinate officers and personnel. These subordinates carry out operational and tactical measures but retain a relative degree of independence in completing their tasks. Assaf Moghadam brilliantly relates mission command—what the German Army refers to as *Auftragstaktik*—to the control structure of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization under Osama bin Laden. According to Moghadam, under Bin Laden’s leadership the al-Qaeda philosophy of managing terrorist activity largely resembled mission command through its top-down process. For example, Bin Laden gave the overarching guidance and approval for the 9/11 attack, but he delegated significant control of the plot to KSM and Mohammad Atta as the respective operational and tactical commanders. Indeed al-Qaeda’s “centralization of decision and decentralization of execution” has largely been a feature of modern military operations. See Assaf Moghadam, “How Al Qaeda Innovates,” *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 489-491.

⁹⁸ Bruce Hoffman, “The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 133-138.

⁹⁹ Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*; as it is more appropriate for the next section, more on this debate will be discussed. For the present portion, terrorist organizations are viewed as institutions with leaders of formally recognized authority who provide direction and policy to subsidiary cadres of actors; this is opposed to informal terrorist networks or independent leaders.

¹⁰⁰ Neumann, Evans, and Pantucci, “Locating Al Qaeda’s Center of Gravity: The Role of Middle Managers,” 825-842.

¹⁰¹ Jackson, “Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and its Application to Al Qaeda,” 244.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Hunter, “Targeted Killing: Self-Defense, Preemption, and the War on Terrorism,” 24.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁷ *Nexus of Global Jihad* is an important contribution to the research on contemporary terrorist cooperation. Moghadam argues that new forms of “networked” cooperation have supplemented existing forms of “organizational” cooperation between formal terrorist groups. The growth of terrorist networks and independent “entrepreneurs” has characterized the diversity of actors in cooperative relationships. While Moghadam’s book is a foundational text on terrorist cooperation, the current study is mostly interested in the author’s typology of terrorist actors. It adopts his label of “informal terrorist actors” which includes informal networks and terrorist entrepreneurs. See Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 48-64.

¹⁰⁸ Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 50-54.

¹⁰⁹ Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 69; quoted in Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 50-51.

¹¹⁰ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York, NY: Norton, 2004), 67, hereafter referred to as “The 9/11 Commission Report.”

¹¹¹ Osama Bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," *Combatting Terrorism Center*, accessed February 2, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/declaration-of-jihad-against-the-americans-occupying-the-land-of-the-two-holiest-sites-original-language-2/>; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, 69.

¹¹² Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 48-50.

¹¹³ Ibid, 55.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 58.

¹¹⁵ Donatella Della Porta, "Recruitment in Clandestine Political Organizations: Italian Left-Wing Terrorism," in *Psychology of Terrorism*, eds. Jeff Victoroff and Arie W. Kruglanski (Hove, U.K.: Psychology Press, 1988), 309-310; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, 84-88; Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 71-75.

¹¹⁶ Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 61.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 63.

¹¹⁸ Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technology, Tactics and Global Trends* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007); Assaf Moghadam, "How Al Qaeda Innovates," 466-497.

¹¹⁹ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, 154.

¹²⁰ Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 64.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Martha Crenshaw, "Decisions to Use Terrorism: Psychological Constraints on Instrumental Reasoning," in *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Organizations*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1992) 29-42; Ehud Sprinzak, "Right-wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective: The Case of Split Delegitimization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 1 (1995): 17-43; Jeff Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 1 (2005): 3-42.

¹²³ See, for example, Martha Crenshaw, "Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 10, no. 4 (1987): 13-31; Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 78-105; Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 69.

¹²⁴ Steve Ressler, "Social Network Analysis as an Approach to Combat Terrorism: Past, Present, and Future Research," *Homeland Security Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2006): 1-10; Arie Perliger and Ami Pedahzur, "Social Network Analysis in the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 1 (2011): 45-50.

¹²⁵ Valdis E. Krebs "Mapping Networks of Terrorist Cells," *Connections* 24, no. 3 (2002): 43-52; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*; Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 48-50.

¹²⁶ Gabriel Weimann, “www.terrorism.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet,” *United States Institute of Peace*, last modified, March 2004, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>.

¹²⁷ Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, 117.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 118.

¹²⁹ Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, 89.

¹³⁰ It is essential to note that studies of the spectrum of terrorist actors have exclusively focused on the evolution of the movement for global jihad. To this author’s knowledge, informal terrorism is a unique feature of the current wave of Islamic extremism and has not previously, or at least pervasively, characterized other ideological terrorist campaigns perpetuated by formal organizations. Therefore, this study’s analysis of terrorist leadership decapitation is admittedly limited to the movement for global jihad and may not be generalizable to other types of terrorism. If indeed informal terrorist actors become a feature of future non-jihadi terrorist campaigns, academics should exclude this aspect in their research.

¹³¹ For a more elaborate examination of global Islamist ideology, see Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*; Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” 207-239; Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 127-143; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, 29-46.

¹³² Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, 143.

¹³³ Abu Musab Al-Suri, “The Call to Global Islamic Resistance” (unpublished manuscript, December 2004).

¹³⁴ Louis Beam, a white nationalist, played a key role in shaping the right-wing movement in the United States following the Vietnam period. He designed a theory of *leaderless resistance* to continue the fight against the U.S. government. It involved abandoning coordination in large groups and adopting small-cells acting without orders from above. This strategy would effectively limit the destruction of revolutionary movements if and when law enforcement infiltrated the cells. See Louis Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” *The Seditonist*, last modified, February 1983, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233097025_'Leaderless_resistance'.

¹³⁵ Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, 133-146.

¹³⁶ C. Dean Pielstick, “Formal vs. Informal Leading: A Comparative Analysis,” *The Journal of Leadership Studies* 7, no. 3 (2000): 99-114.

¹³⁷ Jackson, “Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and its Application to Al Qaeda,” 244.

¹³⁸ Mark Bowden, *The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2012), 125.

¹³⁹ John Parachini, “Aum Shinrikyo,” in *Aptitude for Destruction: Volume 2, Case Studies of Organizational Learning in Five Terrorist Groups*, eds. Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Kim Cragin, John Parachini, Horacio R. Trumillo, and Peter Clark (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), 17-19.

¹⁴⁰ Combatting Terrorism Center, *Militant Ideology Atlas*, ed. William F. McCants (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, 2006), 333.

¹⁴¹ For purposes of this study, formal terrorist organizations are those which are designated by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism’s list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).

¹⁴² U.K. Home Office, *Proscribed Terrorist Organisations* (London, U.K.: Home Office, 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations-2>.

¹⁴³ Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 69.

¹⁴⁴ “Osama bin Laden,” *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/osama-bin-laden>; For information regarding AQ’s ideology, strategy, history of attacks, and evolution, see Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*; The 9/11 Commission Report 2004; Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007); Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 127-143.

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