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LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION

Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations

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Book Review

LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION

Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations

The US policy on counterterrorism essentially hinges on capturing or killing terrorist group leaders, as reflected by Jenna Jordan in *LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION* (2019), which is a seminal publication issued as part of a series of studies on violence and terrorism. Perhaps, what is intended by the policy doesn't correspond to the literal meaning of the running title; rather, it approximates it in terms of the outcome. The bottom line is leadership targeting; more specifically, targeting leaders of terrorist organizations, disrupting their role while engaging in their activities, either by arrest and imprisonment, or by killing and eliminating through various methods, of which decapitation has not risen to surface!

Therefore, the main purpose of the running title may be merely to arouse excitement, simply because the subtitle expresses the intended purpose of meaning explicitly: "Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations." When identifying the successes and failures of this strategy along with the associated repercussions, the author examines over a thousand instances of leadership targeting, involving groups such as Hamas, Al Qaeda, Shining Path, and ISIS. As Jordan demonstrates, group infrastructure, ideology and popular support all play a role in determining how and why leadership decapitation succeeds or fails. Taking heed of these conditions is essential to an effective counterterrorism policy going forward.

Organization of the book

LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION falls into an introduction, six chapters and a general conclusion, which are divided into three main parts:

- ▶ **Part One** includes an “introduction” and the first two chapters: “theory of organizational flexibility” and “assumptions about leadership decapitation”.
 - The introduction sets out the key theme of the book, and raises questions about the impact of targeting terrorist leaders.
 - Chapter One highlights factors impacting the cohesion of such organizations, including: “bureaucracy”, by which the author means “the availability of an organizational structure” that readily responds to changes and replaces leaders, and “history of the organization”, which bestows greater expertise on it to approach and address any existing and potential events, and the power of its ideology within its environment.
 - Chapter Two discusses key assumptions to investigate the “impact of leadership targeting”, related to the strength of the impact of targeting, the position of the target leader in the organization, and the same impact that may lead up to a reduction in the activities of the organization and possibly its collapse.
- ▶ **Part Two** is tailored only to Chapter Three, which brings up the question of how impactful leadership targeting is.

▶ **Part Three** addresses the following themes:

- Chapter Four: Hamas, including Bureaucracy, Social Services, and Local Support.
- Chapter Five: Leftist Shining Path, including Organization and Support.
- Chapter Six: Al-Qaeda including Religious Ideation and Organizational Flexibility.
- Conclusion.

Introduction

The author explains that leadership decapitation means targeting the leaders of specific organizations or groups, including capturing and imprisonment for many years, or elimination, with the aim of nullifying and invalidating their role in their organizations, and diminishing their influence. By time, it has become an approach deeply ingrained in the strategies adopted by many countries in the war on terrorism, triggered by the belief that the cohesion of terrorist groups rests mainly on their charismatic leaders. To this end, the author asks three leading questions:

- ▶ How can leadership targeting cause marked deterioration to a terrorist organization?
- ▶ Does leadership targeting cause a terrorist organization to come to an end or survive?
- ▶ How much does targeting weaken or deter an organization from committing terrorist acts?

Organizational Resilience Theory

The Organizational Resilience Theory investigates the factors of resilience which ensure the power

of influence in lessening the impact of leadership targeting. The foregoing theory identifies three main factors that control the strength of impact:

- ▶ The **Bureaucracy** of the Organization, which means the ability to accommodate changes and replace leaders, in such a method as to stave off any deterioration or decline and shore up when alarming bells start to sound.
- ▶ The **Social Support** that the organizations concerned receive; the more support, the more such organizations can access resources to continue and renew, even if they lose their leadership.
- ▶ The **ideas** that the organization adheres to; it has been observed that both religious and separatist nationalist ideas give such an organization greater cohesion in the face of loss of leadership.

Leadership Targeting Hypotheses

Leadership Targeting Hypotheses presented in **Chapter Two** are manifested in a number of questions on the impact of targeting, and the variables that govern such impact:

- ▶ Does leadership targeting inevitably lead to the collapse of an organization?
- ▶ Does leadership targeting increase exponentially terrorist attacks?
- ▶ Does leadership targeting extend or shorten the life of an organization?

The variables that influence the answers to these questions are as follows:

- ▶ The importance of the position of the target leader in an organization.
- ▶ The method of leadership targeting of an organization.
- ▶ The organizational characteristics, including: size, lifespan and type.
- ▶ The situation of the country in which the organization concerned operates.

Impact of Leadership Targeting

Chapter Three discusses the trends of targeting leaders, and the impact on the progress of organizations, their activities and operations. This depends on two things:

- ▶ Collecting data from reliable sources.
- ▶ Disaggregation of data in light of the size of organizations, lifespan, ideas, the positions of the target leaders, the nature of the ruling system of the country in which they operate, and their gross domestic product.

Initial Notes

The following points are noted down based on the data provided by the author and the classification set forth:

- ▶ Leadership targeting across organizations increased slightly from 1970 to 2000. Later, it increased more following 2000 to reach its peak between 2010 and 2012, and then decreased thereafter.
- ▶ The organizations whose membership falls between 5001 and 10,000 experienced a greater number of leadership targeting incidents, compared to the organizations of smaller sizes, with more than 30% of the total leadership targeting of all six types of organizations.
- ▶ Based on the ideation-based division, the largest percentage of leadership targeting incidents increased by the percentage of the organizations that claim to adopt Islamic thought, followed by the organizations that claim to adopt other religious thoughts, then leftist extremist separatist organizations, and finally far-right extremist organizations.

Impact of Leadership Targeting

Based on the data provided above, it was possible to investigate the impact of leadership targeting in light of the change of activity of organizations following a targeting incident. The study which observes the six factors for classifying the previously mentioned data provides the following points:

- ▶ The percentage of organizations that did not carry out any terrorist attacks, in the year following leadership targeting, and then two years following leadership targeting.
- ▶ The percentage of organizations that collapsed in the year following leadership targeting, and then two years following leadership targeting.

After examining these factors, the following impact became apparent in organizations following leadership targeting:

- ▶ Smaller organizations seem to be most affected by leadership targeting, and larger organizations seem less prone to collapse.
- ▶ Short-lived organizations were most affected by leadership targeting, while the organizations

with a lifespan between 16 and 20 years old were the least affected.

- ▶ Ideologically, right-wing organizations seemed to be most affected by the loss of their leaders, while organizations claiming to be Islamic were the least affected.
- ▶ Terrorist organizations operating in countries with a level of GDP per capita above average (ranging between \$7,000 and \$30,000), are the most affected by leadership targeting, while those operating in poorer countries or with a lower GDP per capita, are the least affected.
- ▶ There were no significant differences in terms of vulnerability to leadership targeting, as per the nature of regimes in the countries in which the organizations operate.

Impact Factors Halted (One Year)		Impact of Leadership Targeting Percentage of Organizations			
		Halted (One Year)	Halted (Two Years)	Collapsed (One Year)	Collapsed (Two Years)
Organization Size Number of Members	1 - 100	61	67	26	33
	101 - 500	28	38	10	16
	501 - 1000	32	41	3	5
	1001 - 5000	26	33	5	10
	5001 - 10,000	24	29	5	8
	10001 (+)	43	50	0	7
Lifespan of Organization (years)	1 - 5	100	75	0	0
	6 - 10	45	42	3	5
	11 - 15	26	32	11	18
	16 - 20	15	23	3	5
	21 (+)	40	51	12	16
Organization Ideology	Leftist (Extremist)	37	48	13	21
	Rightist (Extremist)	61	61	13	17
	Nationalist (Separatist)	31	37	6	9
	Religious (Extremist)	31	37	5	8
	Islamist (Distorting)	28	34	4	6

Impact Factors Halted (One Year)		Impact of Leadership Targeting Percentage of Organizations			
		Halted (One Year)	Halted (Two Years)	Collapsed (One Year)	Collapsed (Two Years)
Position of Leader in Organization (3 Levels)	Chief Leader	42	52	10	15
	Leadership Member	28	32	5	10
	Unit Leader	34	41	12	17
GDP (4 Levels)	Lowest	34	40	1	5
	Lower Average	35	44	8	14
	Higher Average	50	58	23	29
	Highest	36	45	18	18
System of Government (4 Levels)	Lowest	38	52	8	13
	Lower Average	25	39	14	18
	Higher Average	42	54	8	15
	Highest	41	45	12	17

Table (1) Impact of Leadership Targeting Percentage of Impacted Organizations

Based on the above, the data collected reveal the following:

- ▶ Factors impacting the size and type of the organization and the position of the target leaders influence the likelihood that the activities of an organization will cease following leadership targeting.
- ▶ Organizations of a religious nature, separatist organizations, as well as organizations of an Islamic nature are characteristically flexible and can continue their activities after the loss of their leaders.
- ▶ The impact of the loss of the leader of an organization increases the likelihood that its

activities will halt more than the loss of ordinary leaders or members.

- ▶ Organizations operating in densely populated countries are more resilient and resistant to the attacks of their leaders than those operating in countries with less population.

Hamas

Chapter Four brings to focus the operations of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in the Gaza Strip since the end of the 1980s, and incidents targeting Israel. The number of Hamas leaders targeted between 1988 and 2010 in various locations were 81 leaders.

Targeting		First-Rank Leaders	Second-Rank Leaders	Total
Arrest	Number	7	33	40
	Percentage (%)	70	46	50
Liquidation	Number	3	38	41
	Percentage (%)	30	54	50
Total	Number	10	71	81
	Percentage (%)	100	100	100

Table (2) Targeting Hamas Leaders

The continued targeting of Hamas leaders has not deterred the Movement (Hamas) from carrying out its operations against Israel, as it is uniquely flexible and resilient to do so. The author ascribes the continued operations of Hamas to four key reasons:

- ▶ The “**Bureaucratic Pyramid**” that Hamas adopts, as it gives it organizational stability and the ability to withstand and weather leadership targeting.
- ▶ The great “**Popular Support**” that Hamas enjoys, as it gives it popular legitimacy, and enhances its strength and flexibility in addressing the loss of its leaders.
- ▶ The “**Islamist Ideas**” of Hamas – perhaps the most important reason – which gives it a great ability to withstand the constant leadership targeting over the years.
- ▶ The “**Steadfast Popular Support**”, with the increasingly growing popular support of the Movement over time, its flexibility towards the loss of its leaders has been much enhanced and strengthened.

Shining Path

In **Chapter Five**, the author further explores the case of Shining Path, a Communist organization founded in Peru in 1969, and has witnessed since 1983 a glaringly noticeable leadership targeting. However, it has withstood such attack, though, and its activity did not come to an end even when its leader, founder, and theorist, Abimael Guzmán, was arrested in 1992. The following are among the reasons for the resilience of the Shining path and its ability to continue at the time:

- ▶ The “**Bureaucratic Structure**” which gives it flexibility to choose alternatives to target leaders.
- ▶ The “**Popular Support**,” which strengthens its power and legitimacy.
- ▶ The “**Deeply-Ingained Ideology**” among its supporters, even when its leader is arrested.

However, the Shining Path lost a lot of its cohesion and popular support following the arrest of its leader, “Óscar Ramírez Durán” in 1999, and many of

its members broke up and consequently weakened, while its future seemed murky and foggy, as opposed to what its name suggests.

Al Qaeda

Chapter Six revisits the expectations of former US President “Barack Obama” about the defeat of Al-Qaeda, following the successful targeting of “Osama bin Laden” on May 11, 2011. However, the author explains that Al-Qaeda has a special formation different from other organizations and groups, as it is not limited to one organization led by “Osama bin Laden”; rather, it is a group of organizations across various parts of the world, featuring a high degree of independence, such as “Jabhat Al-Nusra” in Syria, known as the “Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham” or commonly referred to as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. The author describes Al-Qaeda as a “Meta-Organization”, as it contains a number of organizations. Therefore, eliminating “Osama bin Laden” has not had the impact that Obama has expected and hoped for. Chapter Six further provides other seminal remarks:

- ▶ Data on targeting Al-Qaeda leaders between 1995 and 2016. The author explains that the following affiliates are subsumed under Al-Qaeda: “The Mother Base, Al-Nusra Jabhat, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Gulf, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” It is noted that targeting Al-Qaeda leaders starting in 1995 was on the increase until it reached 45 cases in 2013, then it began to decline and decrease until it reached only two cases in 2016.
- ▶ Data on Al-Qaeda operations from 1995 to 2017: The author highlights “Jabhat Al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Al-Qaeda in Yemen, the Mother Base, Al-Qaeda in Lebanon, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Gulf, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” In the same vein, the author remarks that the operations have been increasing steadily since 1995, while reaching more than 350 operations in 2014, then the frequency of operations in 2017 decreased to approximately 50 operations.

- ▶ Data on the operations and involvement of “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” along with the “Islamic State in Iraq” and the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)” between 2007 and 2017. Equally important, it is noted that the operations were steadily increasing, exceeding 1400 operations in 2016, and then slightly decreased down to 1300 operations in 2017.

In Chapter Six, the author concludes that the policy of “leadership targeting” has not always been impactful on “Al-Qaeda” and other affiliates. The impact draws on the foregoing reasons, including the “organizational structure and “bureaucracy” of the organization, “allure of ideologies”, and “lifelong expertise”.

Conclusion

The author draws a fitting conclusion that there are terrorist organizations and groups that are so strong and resilient that they can withstand leadership targeting. The author draws telling examples, including Al-Qaeda, Hamas, the Islamic State (ISIS),

the Islamic Youth Movement in Somalia, and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) which calls for secession from Turkey. The conclusion highlights three main factors that lay the foundations for the strength and flexibility of such organizations:

- ▶ Organizational or bureaucratic structure that governs an organization.
- ▶ Popular support or grassroots support.
- ▶ Ideologies adopted by an organization.

The author singles out some paragraphs from the conclusion to give an example of flexible and resilient organizations that withstand such rapidly moving changes. The “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant “ISIS” is purposefully chosen, with seminal statistics on leadership targeting from 2014 to 2017 as shown in Table (3), while other telling examples reveal the operations carried out by the Organization in the same period of time. The conclusions arrived at by the author about the ISIS apply to the Organization before targeting and liquidating Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

Years		Daesh Operations	Daesh Leadership Targeting
2014	Number	1220	27
	Percentage (%)	24	15
2015	Number	1210	47
	Percentage (%)	23.5	26
2016	Number	1420	38
	Percentage (%)	28	21
2017	Number	1260	68
	Percentage (%)	24.5	38
Total	Number	5110	180
	Percentage (%)	100	100

Table (3) ISIS Operations and Leadership Targeting

The author asks one more question still left unanswered: What should countries do to eliminate terrorism?

Although the ultimate purpose of the book is not to identify that, it has come up with the following recommendations:

- ▶ Developing “policies” backed by the capabilities needed to eliminate terrorism.
- ▶ Guarding against “ideologies” that drum up for terrorism.
- ▶ Clamping down on “financing terrorist organizations”.

- ▶ Adopting the principles of “public diplomacy” to counter terrorism.
- ▶ Prioritizing “education and sensitization” as to stave off terrorism.
- ▶ Rendering assistance to “failed” states to steer clear from becoming incubators for terrorist organizations.

Leadership targeting cannot be an efficient strategy to always counter terrorism. Given the dearth or paucity of literature, no research studies have so far provided a holistic theory to explain the reasons for the success of the foregoing strategy in certain cases but not in others. Likewise, the reactions of organizations and groups to arresting or killing their leaders are not the same, including those that collapse, and those that become temporarily poor and split into groups of factions and reduced their capabilities. On the flip side of the potential scenario, leadership targeting can backfire and boomerang, and instigate organizations to retaliate by carrying out frenzied and vicious attacks, more lethally and fatally. Some groups can also take advantage of their flexibility to adapt to the loss of their leaders and pass through and circumvent the working countermeasures, becoming glaringly active, which is a clear indication of their continued and unswerving strength.

Therefore, we have no clear measure to judge the success of the “leadership targeting” strategy in eliminating terrorism, and there is no agreement on how to evaluate counterterrorism policies, leaving

the door open to differences over the best methods to destabilize and defeat terrorist organizations. Still, the strategy of the post-11/9 Attacks to target terrorist group leaders has been a critical component of the US counterterrorism policy, as over the past four years it has killed and arrested hundreds of ISIS leaders, including Al-Qaeda coupled with its affiliates in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria.

Memorable Quotes

“The Book provides timely and compelling and substantial evidence for the ongoing debate on leadership decapitation, as Jenna Jordan reveals the need for a holistic strategy, if we are to successfully defeat terrorist organizations.”

-Ali Soufan

CEO of Soufan Group, founder of the Soufan Center and a former FBI agent.

“This in-depth analysis of the author, Jenna Jordan, refutes and invalidates the prevailing view that we can continue killing in the course of our war on terror. Jordan skillfully explains how targeting hundreds of terrorist leaders can be a short-term tactic that has profound strategic flaws. Have we ever asked ourselves: Why after many decades, the United States is still fighting an endless global war on terrorism? Read this unputdownable book.”

-Audrey Kurth Cronin

Professor at the American University.

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