



The Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation in Combating Insurgencies

BOTTOM LINES

- **The Importance of Leaders.** Evidence suggests that killing or capturing militant leaders (1) increases the chances of a rapid end to insurgencies; (2) enhances the probability of campaign outcomes favorable to counterinsurgents; (3) reduces the intensity of violent conflict; and (4) shrinks the number of insurgent-initiated attacks, such as armed attacks and kidnappings.
- **Martyrdom Effects.** Despite warnings by public officials and terrorism analysts, there is little evidence that killing or capturing insurgent leaders causes blowback violence.
- **Counterterrorism Strategies.** Killing or capturing militant leaders can be a useful tool, though it may be more effective when integrated into a larger counterinsurgency strategy.
- **Group Type.** Counterinsurgents are more successful in campaigns in which they decapitate the insurgent leadership than in those in which they do not, regardless of the group's aims or ideology.

By Patrick B. Johnston

This policy brief is based on “Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns,” which appears in the spring 2012 issue of International Security.

Targeting militant leaders is central to many states' national security strategies, but does it work? What should policymakers expect when government armed forces kill or capture militant leaders? Is leadership decapitation more likely to succeed or fail under certain conditions? These questions have never been more pressing than since the May 2011 killing of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

In recent years, a scholarly consensus has emerged that leadership decapitation rarely helps states to achieve their goals. This conventional wisdom, however, is largely anecdotal; beyond a few well-known cases—in

particular, the Israeli experience—there has been little systematic study about whether removing militant leaders helps or hinders efforts to degrade and defeat militant organizations.

An analysis of leadership targeting in ninety counterinsurgencies since the 1970s suggests that removing militant leaders is neither ineffective nor counterproductive. Quite the opposite: on average, leadership decapitation (1) increases the chances of a rapid end to insurgencies; (2) enhances the probability of a government victory; (3) reduces the intensity of violent conflict; and (4) decreases the number of insurgent attacks. Killing or capturing high-value targets is far from a magic bullet, but states do it because it weakens insurgencies—in short, because it works.

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

According to the conventional wisdom, the civilian population, not the group's leadership or rank-and-file members, is the insurgent's center of gravity. Weaning civilians away from insurgents by winning their hearts and minds is the key to effective counterinsurgency; direct action against insurgent leaders through raids or air strikes may come at the cost of civilian support, inadvertently strengthening insurgencies. The policy would therefore be counterproductive if leadership decapitation is associated with prolonged campaigns and high rates of government defeat and if it increases both the number and lethality of insurgent attacks.

A STATISTICAL ASSESSMENT OF LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION

The effectiveness of decapitation is fundamentally a question of whether insurgencies fare worse after their leaders are killed or captured. In other words, do leaders matter? This is a tricky question. When states kill or capture the leader of a militant organization, scholars have tended to focus on whether the group collapsed quickly; they have rarely framed their analyses with regard to the counterfactual: how the group would have fared had its leader remained in place. The problem with ignoring this counterfactual is that states target militant leaders under particular circumstances, such as when campaigns have ground to a stalemate or when militants pose an especially strong threat, as was the case when the United States killed Osama bin Laden and escalated its night raids in Iraq and Afghanistan. Assessing the effectiveness of leadership targeting is difficult when it occurs during periods when a campaign's momentum has already shifted against the government. Is the apparent lack of success the result of an ineffective tactic or the broader circumstances under which the tactic is used?

To address this issue, the study analyzed a large number of cases in which governments attempted, successfully or unsuccessfully, to remove top insurgent leaders. Failed attempts—which are common and often occur for idiosyncratic reasons—were used as controls to construct a counterfactual for successes. This helps to

isolate the effect of leadership decapitation from other confounding factors. The study examined new data on successful and failed leadership decapitation attempts from ninety campaigns from 1975 to 2003. Leaders were defined as the most powerful figure or figures in each insurgent organization. Lexis-Nexis keyword searches yielded 118 decapitation attempts that could be confirmed; forty-six of these attempts (39 percent) resulted in the removal of an insurgent leader.

The findings indicate that militant leaders do matter and that removing them enhances the effectiveness of counterinsurgency strategies. In brief, decapitations were associated with curtailed insurgent activity, decreased insurgent violence, and an increased likelihood of government victory. These patterns were not limited to certain types of groups; there was no statistical evidence that the impact of decapitation differed across groups with different aims and ideologies.

Termination: Campaigns in which successful strikes occurred suggest that leadership decapitation increases the likelihood of ending an insurgency: more specifically, removing a top insurgent leader increased the chances of terminating costly campaigns in the year following the leader's removal by roughly 25 percent. This says nothing about the substantive outcome of these campaigns, but averting the substantial costs of future counterinsurgency after having achieved a milestone of success is generally a desirable outcome for states.

Victory: States are also more likely to defeat insurgencies after killing or capturing the insurgencies' top leadership. Thus, decapitation has more than just symbolic effects. The findings suggest that states are almost 33 percent more likely to defeat insurgencies during years in which top militants are removed than in years in which similar attempts fail. This suggests that leadership decapitation is not a silver bullet, but it tends to put states at a sizable advantage over insurgencies.

Violence: The impact of leadership decapitation is also seen in insurgencies' tactical capabilities. On average,

insurgencies whose leaders are killed or captured tend to conduct fewer subsequent attacks and kill fewer people than insurgencies whose leaders escape targeting attempts. Although groups vary widely in their attack frequency and lethality both before and after leadership decapitation, leadership removal is associated with reduced violence when controlling for violence before decapitation occurred.

Group Type: Evidence suggests that the findings above are not dependent on the type of insurgent group. No statistical relationship was detected in the data among various kinds of insurgencies—ideological/communist, Islamist, separatist, or center seeking—that would suggest that an organization’s ideology or broad aims systematically increase or decrease its resilience to leadership decapitation. This is perhaps because of the nature of asymmetric warfare, which requires that all clandestine organizations, regardless of their ideologies or political beliefs, adopt broadly similar organizational structures to survive.

CONCLUSION

Leadership decapitation significantly increases states’ chances of tamping down militant violence and defeating insurgencies. As such, it should come as no surprise that decapitation is an extremely common policy, regardless of the ethical objections and legal

ambiguities that surround it. Despite the evidence of leadership decapitation’s effectiveness, scholars and policymakers should consider what it is not. Although decapitation’s impact may be significant in many instances, it is not a silver bullet; other factors will matter greatly in most cases and be decisive in many. Decapitation can help states’ efforts against militants, but it is more effective as part of a larger strategy than as a stand-alone tactic.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick B. Johnston is Associate Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation.

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**Belfer Center
for Science and
International Affairs**

Harvard Kennedy School
79 JFK St.
Cambridge, MA 02138

TEL: 617-495-1400
FAX: 617-495-8963
<http://www.belfercenter.org>

