

Abstract

This study analyzes targeted killing as a counterterrorism instrument and evaluates its impacts on the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in two separate case studies, one analyzing the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi while the other assesses the impact of the killing of Osama Bin Laden. The theory of leadership decapitation is applied in this thesis and the academic discourse on this theory is discussed. Additionally, moral and legal aspects of targeted killing are also briefly considered. The analysis combines a quantitative approach in the form of descriptive statistics of data regarding terrorist attacks with qualitative evaluation of other counterterrorism policies and political as well as societal aspects surrounding the operations. There are some general suggestions regarding leadership decapitation that are validated in this study. Various factors need to be considered when employing targeted killing in counterterrorism, such as the structure of the terrorist group as well as its age. This study presents evidence that targeted killing of high-ranking terrorist leaders is likely to increase the use of suicide bombing in the short-term period after leadership decapitation. It also points out evidence that there is no correlation between targeted killing and the decrease of casualties from terrorism. Finally, this thesis suggests that there is a correlation between targeted killing and a decrease of operational capability of the terrorist group.