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Targeted Killing as a Counterterrorism Instrument:
Evaluating Impacts on The Islamic State and
Al Qaeda



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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

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Introduction

There are various methods for dealing with terrorism today, many of them are non-violent policies and precautions focused on different aspects of society. One particular counterterrorism policy stands out due to its violent and high-risk nature and that is targeted killing. This instrument is a subject of ongoing discussion about its effectiveness, unintended consequences and damage it sows as it has many drawbacks and almost no guarantees that it will cause the intended effect. Although targeted killing is not a tactic of choice for many states, it is widely used to this day by some governments. Along with Israel, the United States is one of few actors that implemented this instrument into their counterterrorism strategy and even adjusted their legislation in a way to overcome the extrajudicial character of killing foreign citizens that are believed to be leaders of terrorist organizations.

Targeted killing remains a very important part of counterterrorism of the United States as they are carrying out lethal strikes on the leadership of hostile organizations consistently throughout recent history. Whether it was the commander of Iranian Quds Qasem Soleimani, second caliph of the Islamic State Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi or the leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri. All of these strikes took place in recent two years, suggesting that targeted killing is a popular method for the fight with terrorism and as we see in the case of the United States, it has a recurrent pattern of deploying this method to suppress the leadership of their enemies.

The scope of this work will be to assess the outcomes of targeted killings of two leaders of different terrorist groups throughout history in regards to how their deaths impacted the organizations and their operational capabilities, while considering some other factors, such as political aftermath as well as societal footprint of these actions. This will be achieved through an analysis of two particular cases. The first case will be the killing of the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019 and the second will be considering the death of Osama Bin Laden under the Operation Neptune Spear in 2011. Both cases are believed to be major events for the development of targeted killing as well as for the leadership decapitation theory that is going to be applied and verified in this thesis. It will be one of the outcomes of this work to provide relevant arguments and proofs for aforementioned claims.

The phenomenon of targeted killing has been studied mainly in regards to Israel and their

practice of leadership decapitation. Daniel Byman (2006) is one of the major contributors to this field of study as his work focused on the Second Intifada and how the effectiveness of targeted killings progressed during this period. His work proves very useful for this research as his findings appear to be applicable also on the approach of the United States. Byman concludes that targeted killings helped to change the behavior of Hamas during the Second Intifada. This argument is further supported by Charles Kirchofer (2016), who examined targeted killings as an instrument for achieving compellence and whether it is even possible to deter terrorist groups. Both Byman and Kirchofer agree that Israel has managed to reach some goals through targeted killings, although it is important not to use them in certain scenarios, such as during ceasefires, as they easily become counterproductive.

Bryan C. Price (2012) analyzed how targeted killings contribute to the fight against terrorism through the leadership decapitation theory and explains why it is so effective because of the unique organizational structures of terrorist groups. Similar knowledge provides the text of Patrick B. Johnston (2012), who examined this theory within the field of counterinsurgency. Further research on theoretical background is provided by Mannes (2008), who tested whether killing terrorist leaders decreases the group's activity through the Snake Head Strategy. He comes to a similar end as previous authors as he highlights that leadership decapitation might not be enough for shutting down an older terrorist organization. He further points to an interesting finding that is suggesting a higher probability for the rise of violence after decapitating the leadership of religious organizations compared to secular groups.

Current research about the effect of targeted killings on the Islamic State in particular is not that vast as studies about how Hamas, for example, was affected by Israeli strikes on their leadership. The death of al-Baghdadi's successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, is very recent as it happened in 2022 and databases of terrorist attacks do not yet contain data about terrorist attacks and violence that followed this decapitation as well as the recent death of al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Hence, there is an absence of research about those particular targeted killings. However, some authors managed to analyze the short-term fallout of al-Baghdadi's assassination. One of them is Klein (2022), who pointed out that recent targeted killings might have a negative short-term impact on ISIS and its capabilities, but a surge of radicalisation might also follow.

It is also important to approach targeted killing from the legal perspective as it is problematic to justify assassination of a foreign citizen that takes place outside of an armed conflict. Very comprehensive view on the legal history of targeted killings is provided by Markus Gunneflo (2016) who carefully considers the international law in relation to the debate about the legal basis of targeted killing. Legal challenges of targeting high value individuals are also developed by Lisa Hajjar's (2017) comparative analysis of Israeli and U.S. targeted killing policies and their shortcomings. She points out how these two actors attempted to reinterpret both international and federal law in order to legitimize the practice of targeted killing.

The debate on how to measure the success of counterterrorism policies has been vast and it will be thoroughly covered and discussed in this work. It can be difficult to decide the criteria for evaluating the success of a counterterrorism policy. Van Dongen (2009) in his text offers some alternatives as he believes that regular measures suffer from many difficulties. Further shortcomings of measuring success of targeted killings are described by Carvin (2012), she confirms that there is no general consensus about the definition of what constitutes a success in counterterrorism.

The first chapter of this study is focused on the theory of leadership decapitation and covers the academic debate that has so far developed about the theory, also including criticism of targeted killing. This chapter is then divided into two minor subchapters. One is covering targeted killing from a legal perspective and how it is justified through international law, while the second develops rather moral arguments that are often addressed when studying targeted killing in a broader perspective. The second chapter is an analysis of two separate cases of targeted killing and cross-case results are drawn and discussed in the third chapter. The final evaluation of the results from the case studies and answer for the research question is presented in the conclusion.

Methodology

The impact and success of targeted killings of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Osama Bin Laden will be researched through multiple case study consisting of two separate case studies, each of which will analyze the targeted killing of one terrorist leader and its consequences. The case studies will have an explanatory character, within which theory of leadership decapitation will be tested and verified on two samples.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches will be combined in this research. Quantitative approach will be utilized in the form of descriptive statistics regarding the work with data on terrorist attacks. Methods of executing specific targeted killings will be analyzed qualitatively as well as some metrics of success that examine political and societal consequences of these actions. Data for this research will be drawn primarily from public databases, archives of academic texts and news articles. Global Terrorism Database (GTD), maintained by the University of Maryland (2022), will serve as the key dataset regarding incidents of terrorism.¹ Nonetheless, it must be noted that even though it is so far the biggest public database on terrorism, it currently features data only until the end of 2020 so it is not possible to study any long-term impacts of the death of al-Baghdadi since he was targeted in late 2019. Hence, the time period for measuring the success of targeted killings will be in both cases set for six months prior to the attack and six months after the decapitation took place in order to be able to reach comparable results and also to cover more complex elements rather than just the immediate impacts of the strikes. Second caveat of the GTD that is worth mentioning are unclaimed attacks that the database flags as if they were perpetrated by the designated terrorist group based on reports of different sources. This factor will be considered in this analysis and these attacks will be subjected to closer scrutiny and if the involvement of the group cannot be verified from multiple trustworthy sources, they will not be accounted for.

As Carvin (2012: 545) points out, setting universal and incontestable criteria for measuring

¹ To enhance the processing of data and due to the large size of the GTD dataset, it was separated into two subsets, one for each case study. The subsets are available at: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bjNAKzGzH39szaoVTK0cJrUcYwcJdu1Y?usp=share_link.

success of targeted killings is impossible. It is thus appropriate to consider a broader set of criteria, rather than overly relying on one metric. Moreover, Bures and Hawkins (2020: 575–576) highlight that studies of targeted killings that considered only data after the decapitation was carried out might have been too restrictive as there was no certainty that these post-operational events related to a particular targeted killing. For that reason this study will be also considering other events that might have impacted the data, such as other related counterterrorism measures, political affairs or the possibility of preparations of more sophisticated attacks which could potentially cause a delay in the frequency of terrorist attacks, as Perl (2007: 2) suggested.

Drawing inspiration from aforementioned pieces of literature that studied the success of targeted killings, this research will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators. Terrorist attacks during the defined time period will be measured based on criteria that will help to analyze capabilities of the given terrorist organization to inflict damage and whether targeted killing affects this ability. This data will be collected both prior to the decapitation and also after it was carried out to highlight a trend. Quantitative indicators subjected to analysis will be the frequency of attacks and casualty rate, as they can illustrate a general direction of violence that is either rising or declining. Type of targets will also be analyzed as it can help to understand whether the group targeted primarily civilians or rather the military or police objects which tend to be generally more difficult to combat and require more resources. Among this data will also be a weapon type, which – if available – can signal a shift of resources if there is for example a pattern of using explosives that is suddenly exchanged for small firearms or cold weapons (Klein 2022). In addition to these indicators, qualitative evaluation of governmental and societal response to the decapitation will also be a significant part of the estimation of success. The second set of indicators will be researched through the level of popular support of this counterterrorism measure in the targeted country as well as in the United States and if there was an observable impact on society and political situation, possibly in the form of protests or diplomatic actions.

All of the aforesaid analytical methods and indicators will be used for answering the

research question, which is as follows: how effective were targeted killings of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, former leader of the Islamic State, and Osama Bin Laden, former leader of al-Qaeda, and how these strikes impacted the groups and their operational capabilities?

1 Leadership Decapitation Theory

Leadership decapitation theory will be tested in this case study due to its high compatibility with targeted killing since the primary target in both selected cases of targeted killing was the leader of the particular organization at that given time and also an important figure in the history of the terrorist group that had high authority in the group's decision making. Leadership decapitation theory suggests that removing the leader of an organization should have various negative impacts on the group, ranging from leadership vacuum and the absence of a charismatic leader to operational disadvantage due to expected transfer of resources from offense to defense and protection of important figures (Price 2012: 9–10). Decapitating leadership of a terrorist organization is a very expensive tactic that demands precise intel which can be gathered for years before the operation can be executed and even then there is no certainty that it will reach the intended effect. It is important to note that leadership decapitation usually does not cause the immediate demise of the group, the expectation of decreased operational capabilities in the short-term period should be more realistic.

One of the caveats concerning the effectiveness of leadership decapitation is the structure of the organization. Centralized organizations should be generally more vulnerable to the loss of leadership since their operations need to be processed through a certain hierarchical structure that can be disrupted, whereas the operational capabilities of decentralized groups should not suffer too much in the case of elimination of their leadership since they do not tend to be dependent on it as they usually consist of multiple branches that operate on their own. According to Regan (2022), targeting leaders of organizations that are not organized in hierarchical fashion has only a minimal impact on their ability to inflict damage or their survival. This statement is further supported by Clarke (2021), who thinks that al-Qaeda and its operations were largely immune to leadership decapitation due to its unique and complex organizational structure where there are multiple branches whose leadership is based in various countries and so they do not require permission from the central leadership to carry out attacks, although he admits that it might have been effective if the goal was only to eliminate its local branches.

Second important factor that influences the outcome of leadership decapitation is the age of the organization. The data from Jordan's (2014: 22) study suggest that larger and older religious terrorist organizations are highly resilient to leadership decapitation. She argues that those well-established organizations often have developed bureaucratic features that allow them to survive strikes on their leadership and make them overall more structurally stable (Jordan 2014: 14). Research by Regan (2022) also suggests that targeting leadership of militant groups early in their lifespan increases the chance of their collapse. He illustrates it in the case of al-Qaeda, which was relatively old and developed when the campaign targeting their leadership began, thus having a certain level of bureaucracy strengthening its structures.

In order to inflict the most damage to the group through leadership decapitation the organization is expected to have a charismatic leader who will be hard to replace. Boot (2022) highlights that the death of bin Laden was so important due to him being a symbol of jihadism for many years. He thinks that one of the reasons why al-Qaeda experienced a demise as a global terrorist organization was the fact that low-profile al-Zawahiri could not replace bin Laden and his charismatic personality as the leader of the group. Meanwhile, the Islamic State grew in size and importance as it was led by charismatic al-Baghdadi. Some Leaders are seen as crucial to the continued success of an organization due to their leadership capabilities and charisma. These abilities are seen as essential to maintaining the goals and direction especially of religious organizations (Jordan 2009: 726–727).

The death of a leader does not always lead to the loss of his authority and the credibility of the organization. In some cases, leadership decapitation might cause the exact opposite. This is a phenomenon that needs to be kept in mind when states deploy this tactic. When Israel targeted the leader of Hamas Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in 2004, he was quickly proclaimed a martyr and the whole region praised him (Juergensmeyer 2022: 41). Hamas gained strong support of the public in upcoming elections and Israel had to sustain even more pressure from the Palestinians and from Hamas itself (Barfi 2004). This is one of many examples where leadership decapitation might backfire because it is carried out under inconvenient circumstances such as upcoming elections and targeting of a group that has

strong support of the local community.

As illustrated above, the time period during which the leadership is decapitated matters. Some leaders might be perceived as the ones constraining the group from perpetrating indiscriminate violence in comparison to their successors. In that case, their death might allow changes in the leadership and perhaps shift the course of the group's targeting tactics. As Jenkins (2016) notes, leadership is a precious commodity that can be degraded through targeted killing, however, in some cases the replacement for killed terrorist leaders proved to be more capable than their predecessors.

There are also many negative aspects related to leadership decapitation that need to be considered carefully when studying its effectiveness. Some serious downsides surfaced from the academic work of authors focusing on this counterterrorism measure in regards to retaliation and increased targeting of civilians. Study by Abrahms and Potter (2015: 328–330) suggests that after the killing of a militant leader, the proportion of violence against soft civilian targets rises by 7 percent while the rate of attacks against hard military targets substantially decreases.² Increased violence against civilian targets was also observed in cases where the subject survived the decapitation attempt. This study serves as strong evidence that leadership deficit promotes terrorism by delegating tactical decisions to lower-ranking members of targeted organizations. According to the authors, these members have generally higher incentive to perpetrate indiscriminate violence since it tightly correlates with the position within the group's hierarchy. This might be caused either by fewer resources, lower discipline or higher emotional tensions caused by experience from the battlefield and the need for revenge. On the contrary, violence should get more selective when the leadership is strong since they realize the counterproductivity of civilian targeting. Based on this research, targeted killing indeed promotes civilian targeting, however it is not clear whether only temporarily and if so, for how long these spikes in violence might last.

²This research used a dataset of Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior focusing only on 118 non-state militant organizations from the Middle East and Northern Africa targeting civilians in the time period from 1980 to 2004 (Abrahms and Potter (2015: 320).

The fact that a retaliation after leadership decapitation should be expected is further confirmed by David (2002: 9), who points out four examples when targeted killing carried out by Israel resulted in extreme civilian casualties due to retaliatory attacks by Hamas from 1996 to 2002. The most common way of retaliation in those cases was suicide bombing. He further notes that targeted killing resulted in the use of suicide bombing by groups that previously did not employ this method, such as al-Aqsa Brigades. However, the exact opposite was observed by Klein (2022), who found out that after the death of al-Baghdadi the number of suicide bombings perpetrated by ISIS drastically decreased. Boaz Ganor (2012: 2–3) describes retaliatory attacks related to leadership decapitation as the boomerang effect. He admits that there is no certainty that a strike will trigger retaliation. Retaliation is directly related to the operational capability of the targeted organization. When the delimiting factor of the decapitated organization is its operational capability, there will be no retaliation even though its motivation for retaliatory violence might be increased. The boomerang effect should be expected if the delimiting factor of an organization to attack is solely the lack of motivation but it has sufficient capabilities to do so. In such cases, leadership decapitation would trigger retaliatory attack. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between what is a retaliatory attack and what is not since some attacks would be carried out regardless of previous counterterrorism measures.

When a state considers the use of targeted killing, arresting the leader instead might seem as a legitimate alternative which could cause less negative effects because the leader survives. Research conducted by Jordan (2009: 739) shows that arresting the top leader of an organization resulted in its collapse in 21 percent of the cases, while killing the leader led to its collapse in 30 percent of the cases. Surprisingly, Jordan found out that the detention of the upper echelon member, which resulted in the collapse of the group in 15 percent of the cases, was more successful in comparison with the death of such a member, which caused the intended result only in 7 percent of the cases.³ This suggests that if the

³The dataset of this research consisted of 298 cases of leadership decapitation against 96 organizations in the time period from 1945 to 2004. Leadership decapitation case was deemed as successful if the group ceased its activity within two years after the strike (Jordan 2009: 733).

desired effect is the collapse of an organization, leadership decapitation is in fact more effective than conducting an arrest. Even though arrest puts personnel in considerable danger, it can provide valuable intelligence from interrogation, potentially exposing operations of the organization. The advantage of gaining intelligence is lost with the decision of killing the leadership. Ultimately, incarcerating terrorist leaders does not completely cut their influence from the group. They can still send instructions from behind the bars and recruit new members within the ranks of inmates. Prisons with detained terrorists are also often targeted by their fellow members in order to free them, as we have seen on the example of the skirmish on al-Hasakah prison in Syria (Loveluck – Cahlan 2022). This signals that captured terrorist leaders are not easily forgotten by their organization, especially when it experiences a shortage of members or leadership.

Leadership decapitation clearly has its downsides as well as certain benefits compared to other tactics for combating terrorism, although stating that leadership decapitation is counterproductive simply is not right. There are certain scenarios where arresting a terrorist leader is not possible and killing him through a precision strike with a cruise missile or an unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) allows to strike more efficiently on a territory under the control of hostile forces. The data about the success of targeted killing on the collapse of terrorist groups also present contradictory results. For example, Jordan (2009: 746) points out to an interesting inference that 53 percent of decapitated groups from her dataset fell apart, while 70 percent of organizations that did not experience leadership decapitation also declined. Although this might be explained by the fact that groups that were not decapitated just were not perceived as threats so imminent to be considered for targeting by any government and did not have sufficient operational capabilities to survive, it cannot be ignored either. What can be stated with confidence is that killing a leader when his movement is already weak can hasten the demise of his group (Juergensmeyer 2022: 41).

1.1 Legal Aspects of Targeted Killing

The legality of targeted killing is a strong factor that is often being used as an argument against the usage of this tactic. Killing a foreign citizen on the land of a sovereign country is

a very thin ice in terms of justification of such action. The international law is to be considered in particular, as it has both shaped and been shaped by the practice of targeted killing, as Gunneflo (2016: 1) notes. According to him, the use of targeted killing by Israel and the United States did not emerge against the law but rather through precise legal work.

One of the most important legal precedents in the history of targeted killing is perhaps the case of killing Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen. This case is so unique since al-Awlaki was not only affiliated to al-Qaeda, he was also a citizen of the United States. The US administration later claimed that the drone strike was carried out within the frame of the law of armed conflict, during which, one can be killed without a proper trial if he fights in the enemy ranks, even if he has a different citizenship. The government feared that letting al-Awlaki live would endanger the lives of their citizens, thus making it an action of necessary defense (Zuradzki 2013: 2911–2912). This way of justification seems to be often met with criticism for al-Awlaki did not yet commit a terrorist attack and so the imminent threat he allegedly embodied can be disputed. This case also helps to underline the misconception that targeted killing does not necessarily need to be judged through local law, it can also be justified within the framework of the law of an armed conflict since this area of law certainly opens new possibilities for the perpetrator.

The term armed conflict is what sparks the debate regarding justification of targeted killing because some might argue that targeting a radical leader from a non-state entity does not fall into the definition of armed conflict in the scope of international law. According to Schweiger (2019: 744–745), we are experiencing a conceptual and also geographical widening of the right to self-defense by actors such as Israel and the United States, even though the right for self-defense on the territory of another state can be invoked only if the government had been responsible for the hostilities. Additionally, those acts of self-defense on foreign territory are often deemed as necessary because of alleged unwillingness or inability of the given state to take action against the particular threat (Schweiger 2019: 745).

In 2006 the Israel Supreme Court ruled that targeted killing is a legitimate instrument against terrorism and allowed the Israel Defense Forces to continue with targeted killing if certain criteria were met. The operation must be carried out in a way that no civilians are harmed and the human rights of the target must be considered (Wilson 2006). Gunneflo (2016: 11) claims that all these aspects of the Court's declaration make itself involved in what he calls

'lawmaking violence'. Even though both the United States and Israel legalized the use of targeted killing in their jurisdiction, the international community condemned this practice on several occasions. The European Council expressed its concern about the Israeli targeted killings, declaring them as extra-judicial killings that are violating international law (European Commission 2004). Several members of the European Parliament also voiced their disapproval of targeted killing campaigns of the United States, calling for a collective response to make the US abide by their legal obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law (Yachot 2013). Besides the European Union, dozens of states raised objections to the practice of targeted killing at the Security Council of the United Nations, although they focused mainly on the Israeli government and not so much on the United States (Schweiger 2019 747–748). This helps to understand that the international community generally has a negative stance against targeted killing, although it is clearly not willing to take any political action other than voicing their objections through public statements.

1.2 Moral Challenges of Targeted Killing

When fighting terrorists in urban areas it is important to be aware of their ability to merge into the civilian population and how they can utilize civilian infrastructure for cover. This requires increased precision when targeting terrorists in populated areas to avoid collateral damage. The possibility of killing innocent bystanders is one of the biggest challenges that stands between the decision to approve an operation targeting militants in urban areas. The danger of mistakes that can be caused for example by incorrect intelligence can cause collateral damage that is never acceptable by the society and leads to a loss of legitimacy of the operation and damages the credibility of the government. Byman (2006: 101) notes that if we do not accept terrorism because it kills innocent people, how can we approve counterterrorism campaigns that do the same?

Another problem that occurs when targeting terrorists concerns their classification under international conventions. Regular members of state-aligned armed forces should be protected by the law of armed conflict and treated accordingly in situations such as imprisonment. But terrorists are generally labeled as unlawful enemy combatants because they do not abide by the law of armed conflict. This status denies them the protection under the Third Geneva Convention since they do not fulfill the requirements for being a member

of armed forces nor do they meet the criteria for protection as civilians (Milanovic 2007: 386). However, some authors (see Byman 2006: 101) argue that if they are to be executed, they should not be approached as soldiers but rather as civilians, granting them the right for a proper judicial process beforehand.

When assessing the right time to carry out a targeted killing operation, armed forces should ideally wait for the right situation until they reach certainty that the target is alone. But how should such an operation proceed when the family or companions of the target are in his proximity and there is a risk that they will be killed along with the terrorist? When the attack is not done remotely using an UCAV or a cruise missile, even relatives of the target can put the personnel carrying out the operation in danger as they can be protecting the target. It can be problematic to classify these individuals as unlawful enemy combatants and so they should be approached as civilians. Drawing the line for defining someone as a civilian can be difficult in such situations. For instance, how should a terrorist leader's driver or a housekeeper be evaluated? During the raid on al-Qurayshi in 2022, his wife was killed as well as two children (Corera 2022). Although it was the result of the terrorist triggering an explosive device, it is difficult to blame the operation for their death. Perhaps the operators could choose more convenient conditions for the attack, but this might have been the best option so far as the place was relatively isolated. Even though the US administration additionally reviewed this operation, there seems to be no consequences for the death of the civilians. John F. Kirby (2022) from the US Department of Defense noted that the US forces also managed to evacuate ten civilians from the compound, succeeding with the protection of at least some of them. The fact that al-Qurayshi might have been using own family as a human shield is also an important factor to consider. If he was able to willingly take the life of his family in order to evade his capture, would it be fair to blame the operation for their death?

2 Analysis of Targeted Killing Cases

In this chapter, two cases of targeted killing will be analyzed separately based on previously set quantitative and qualitative criteria. Although the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took place eight years after the death of Osama Bin Laden, both cases have multiple similarities in the aspects of the operations. Both cases were operations of the United States, although each in a different country. Similarly, each mission was executed by special forces deployed directly on ground to carry out the assault directly rather than utilizing precision munitions or drones to kill the target remotely. This indicates that these operations at least theoretically had the possibility to capture the target alive if possible while securing strategic materials from their compounds.

2.2 First Case: The Killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, who is generally known by his nom de guerre Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was the first self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State and perhaps the most notorious leader of the jihadist group. It was himself who in 2014 declared the Islamic caliphate from Mosul in Iraq and ruled it for the most of the time when the group established themselves as a territorial entity, briefly controlling a territory with millions of Muslim inhabitants in Syria and Iraq. He was also behind the genocide of the Yazidi, one of the biggest atrocities committed by the jihadi group. Thousands of Yazidi were killed during this persecution which began in Sinjar in Northern Iraq. Al-Baghdadi was the head of the Islamic State during the peak of its power in terms of popular support as it experienced a surge of new foreign fighters. In 2015, approximately 30 000 new foreign fighters joined the Islamic State (Picker 2016). During this time, the organization also started to incorporate information campaigns into its operations to spread propaganda and legitimize itself and its actions. One of these operations was to spread information that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was related to the Quraysh tribe which, according to Muslim tradition, was of high importance as the new caliph was supposed to be a Quraysh, suggesting a descent from the Prophet Mohammad's tribe (Lister 2014: 10–11). This alleged lineage was only adding to his personality and charisma that he as a Salafi preacher had.

The influence that al-Baghdadi had on the group made him an obvious target of interest for the US government. Interestingly, in 2004 he was briefly detained in the infamous prison

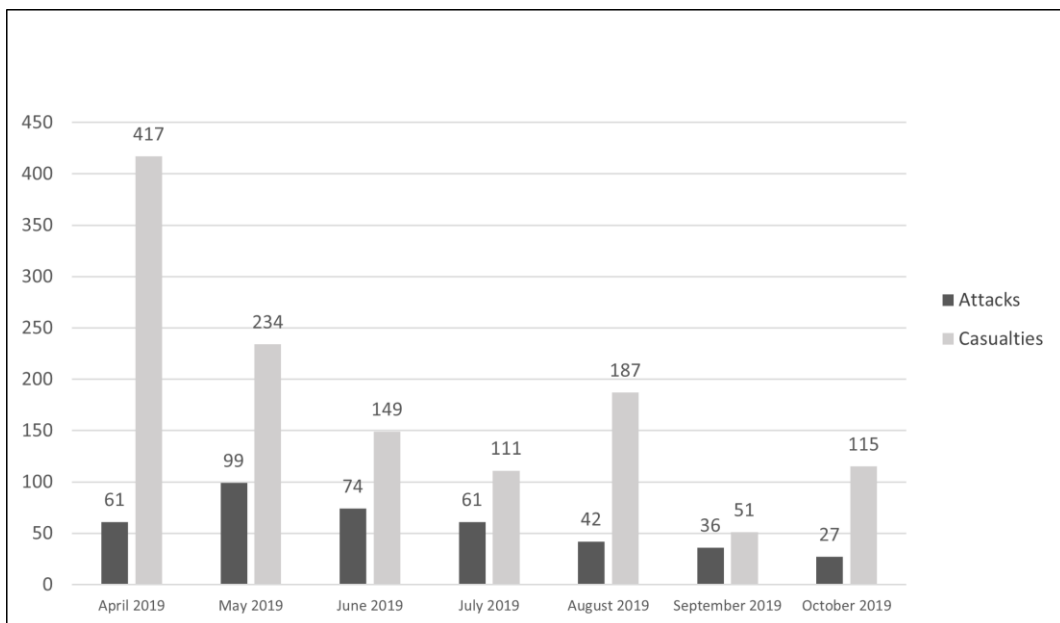
camp Bucca that is considered an important place for the rise of the Islamic State as it had a high concentration of its future high-ranking members and influential jihadists at the time (Kadercan 2016: 66–67). The US intelligence agencies were searching for al-Baghdadi for many years and he was finally located during Donald Trump’s administration. According to Trump (as cited in U.S. Department of Defense 2019), capturing or killing al-Baghdadi has been a priority of his administration and their national security agenda. The operation itself had finally become possible when the US intelligence services along with the Syrian Democratic Forces gained an important informant who was able to provide them with information about al-Baghdadi’s whereabouts including precise description of his compound. This person was a key asset to the whole operation as he was a trusted associate of the leader of the Islamic State who had lost his faith in the organization. His motivation might have been multiplied with the fact that the US government offered 25 million dollars for information leading to al-Baghdadi (Warrick– Nakashima – Lamothe 2019).

When the US intelligence agencies were certain that al-Baghdadi is located in Syrian Idlib, they had to begin with planning of the extremely difficult operation that took them months as they were to deploy their special forces into an environment controlled by Syrian forces combined with the presence of Russian troops and jihadist influence. On October 26, 2019, the operation began under the codename Kayla Mueller, the name of a US citizen murdered by the Islamic State. US Army Delta Force deployed by helicopters surrounded the compound and urged its inhabitants to surrender, saving several civilians, before entering the building and killing those that resisted (Cohen – Katz 2019). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi escaped into a tunnel where he eventually triggered his suicide belt, killing himself and three of his children. Although there was a possibility that al-Baghdadi might be captured alive, the informant provided the US intelligence with knowledge that al-Baghdadi was supposedly always traveling with a suicide vest in case he was ambushed (Warrick – Nakashima – Lamothe 2019). Considering this knowledge, the US forces must have evaluated that capturing the terrorist leader alive was unlikely and extremely dangerous for the involved personnel. The fact that al-Baghdadi did indeed kill himself proves that the provided information was accurate and this outcome of the operation should have been expected. The following subchapter will be dedicated to the analysis of quantitative indicators of various aspects that are assumed to be crucial for determining the impact on the operational capability of the Islamic State to carry out attacks and inflict damage.

2.2.1 Analysis of Quantitative Indicators

To estimate how the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi affected the operational capability of the Islamic State, several indicators that were previously described will be analyzed. Each indicator will be examined in the time frame of six months prior to the leadership decapitation and also six months after the operation, including full months except for the month when the leadership decapitation took place to provide comparable results. The subject of analysis is the Islamic State and its provinces from across the regions. The first aspect that will be analyzed is the general number of terrorist attacks per month combined with casualties caused by those attacks within the declared time period. The Islamic State and its provinces managed to carry out exactly 400 attacks within six months before the death of its leader with 1 264 casualties.

Figure 1: The Number of ISIS Attacks and Casualties Prior to al-Baghdadi's Death



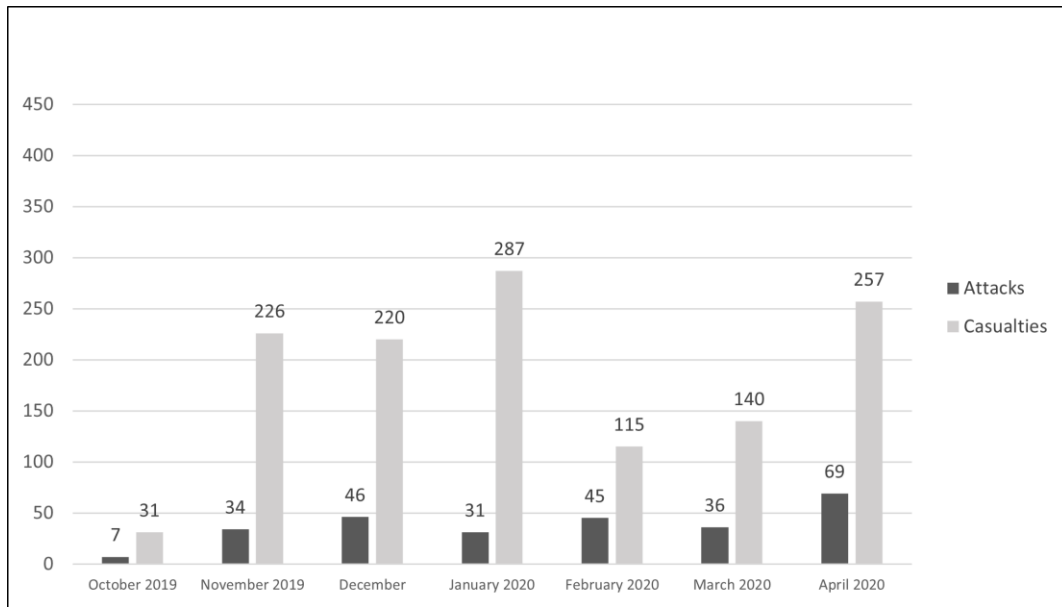
Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

As Figure 1 shows, the highest number of casualties occurred in April 2019. This is mainly due to the fact that the Islamic State carried out a series of deadly attacks in Sri Lanka. Six places were attacked simultaneously, killing more than 250 at hotels and religious places during the celebration of Easter. The attack was well-planned and carried out by multiple suicide bombers (The New York Times 2019). Although this is a major attack and its scale

suggests that the capability of the Islamic State to inflict damage was relatively high, the following months illustrate a slight downtrend in the frequency of attacks as well as casualties. Noteworthy, in March 2019 the Islamic State lost the battle for Baghuz, the last city it had controlled. Al-Baghdadi allegedly escaped from the city a few months before it fell, hiding elsewhere in Syria (Chulov 2019). This might put the declining number of attacks into the context as the group experienced a territorial demise and had to consolidate itself. Even though there seems to be no attacks of such scale as the one in Sri Lanka in the following months, the group was able to carry out 1.89 attacks per day on average.

After Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed, it became clear that the spokesman of the group was also killed shortly after the operation. Media affiliated to the Islamic State generally expressed that their ideology will prevail even without al-Baghdadi, sending a message that they will continue with their operations. Shortly after, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi was appointed as the new leader. This act expressed the effort to maintain continuity of the group amidst the hardship it was experiencing (Abdulkhalek – Laessing 2019). Interestingly, the reaction of rival jihadist organizations was different. Media related to al-Qaeda and its branches praised al-Baghdadi's death and denounced the direction of the organization during his leadership, urging his followers to join them instead (The Wilson Centre 2019).

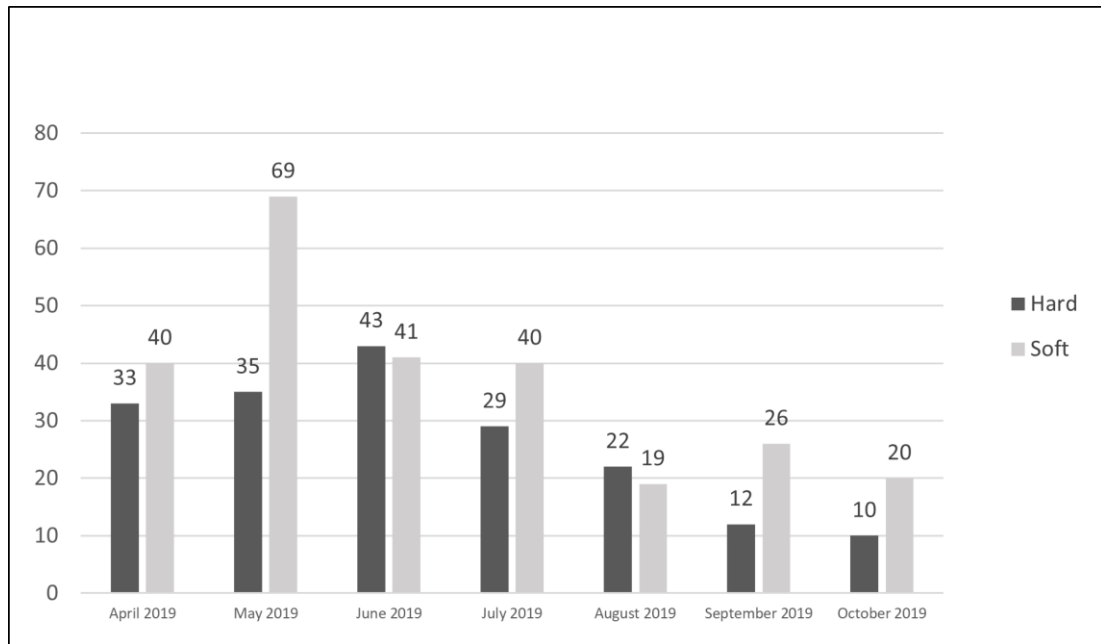
Figure 2: The Number of ISIS Attacks and Casualties After al-Baghdadi’s Death



Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

In the six-month period following the leadership decapitation operation of the Islamic State, the group carried out a total of 268 attacks which claimed responsibility for 1 276 casualties. There is a clear decrease of the frequency of attacks which fell to 1.43 attacks per day, decreasing by 33% compared to the period prior to the decapitation. However, the casualty rate is in this case the most interesting factor as it actually slightly increased even though the overall number of attacks declined. This means that the attacks of the Islamic State became less frequent but substantially deadlier. Figure 2 illustrates that in the period after the decapitation the downtrend that was observed before in terms of attack frequency and casualties stopped declining. There also seem to be no spikes of casualties in the data caused by large-scale operations as was the one in Sri Lanka, thus the casualty rate was rather more consistent and without significant deviations throughout the second examined time period. Perhaps the largest attack after al-Baghdadi’s death was the assault on a Nigerian military base during which over a hundred died (Reuters 2020). Data from the GTD shows that attacks with higher numbers of casualties were happening mostly in Africa. This is also supported by other authors (see Beavor – Berger 2020) who pointed out the rising influence of the Islamic State in Africa, particularly its Central Africa Province that gradually began to claim responsibility for more attacks.

Figure 3: Type of Target Prior to al-Baghdadi's Death

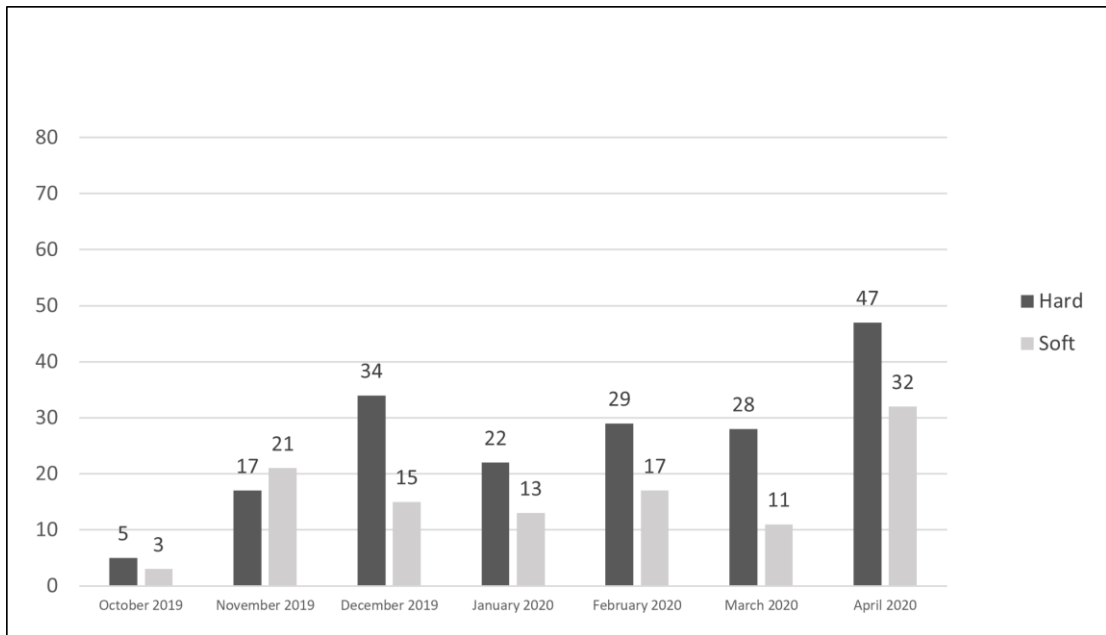


Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

The next indicator that was analyzed is the type of target during these attacks. Those are divided into two categories. The first type are hard targets, generally representing protected targets that are more difficult to attack such as the armed forces and military infrastructure, police forces or prisons. The second type are soft targets, describing unprotected subjects such as unarmed civilians, civilian infrastructure or foreign diplomatic missions.⁴ Beginning with the data on type of target before the decapitation strike took place, hard targets were attacked 184 times while soft targets were the subject of terrorist attacks of the Islamic State 255 times. Figure 3 shows that the organization clearly carried out more attacks on soft targets only with the exception of June and August 2019 during which hard targets were slightly more dominant in terrorist operations of the Islamic State. There is also a declining trend in terms of the number of hard targets that began in June 2019 which correlates with the decreasing number of attacks from Figure 1.

⁴ Some types of targets were left out due to their irrelevance for this research. Those were other terrorist groups, violent political parties and unknown targets. Multiple target types could have been targeted during one attack.

Figure 4: Type of Target After al-Baghdadi's Death



Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

The pattern of the choice of target notably changes in the time period after the leadership decapitation of the Islamic State. Figure 4 uncovers that hard targets became dominant over soft targets quite significantly just a few months after the operation. The overall number of hard targets also provides an interesting discovery with a total of 182 occurrences while soft targets were attacked only in 112 cases. Protected targets were the subject of attacks in 67.91% of all attacks after the decapitation, with comparison to being targeted only in 46% of all terrorist attacks of the Islamic State before al-Baghdadi's death. Considering the lower frequency of attacks after the decapitation, there is a clear shift of focus on military and police targets in the time period after the decapitation. This finding is contrary to the suggestion by Abrahms – Potter (2015: 329–330) who predicted that killing one leader of a militant organization should have an immediate impact on civilian targeting which according to their data increased by approximately 40%. This is clearly not the case of the Islamic State as the share of soft targets actually proportionally decreased. Better understanding of this phenomena might be provided by Jenkins (2016), according to whom, high-value targeting forces terrorist leaders to go underground and disrupts their ability to communicate and function properly within the group. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi might not have been able to fully participate in the planning of operations in the months prior to his death so he delegated his command to lower-ranking members who possessed fewer resources and prioritized soft

targets. After his death, this handicap was no longer in place due to the quick appointment of the new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi, which was announced within one week after the targeted killing operation (Callimachi – Schmitt 2019). Such a turn of events might have contributed to a certain change of targeting tactics of the group due to changes in leadership which no longer had to hold back in terms of operation planning.

The last quantitative indicator that was used for assessing the effect of targeted killing on the Islamic State is the type of weapon used in terrorist attacks. Previous research (see Klein 2022) suggested that this kind of data can help to understand whether there was a shift of resources within the group, potentially signaling a decrease of operational capability. Weapon types that were selected from the dataset are believed to be important for revealing the quantity of resources that the group had available for executing attacks. Melee weapons and vehicles are generally inferior to firearms in terms of their cost and availability. Explosives tend to be listed above all aforementioned weapons due to their cost and knowledge that is required to produce them. Explosive weapons are further divided as vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) and person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIED). The use of VBIED can result in extremely high numbers of casualties due to the available space for planting large quantities of explosives. Growing use of PBIED by militants can signal an increase of morale and determination to die as a martyr for the ideology.

Figure 5 shows the types of weapons that were used by the Islamic State six months prior to the leadership decapitation.⁵ Explosives were clearly the dominant weapon type with overall 240 occurrences, often combined with firearms. There was only a minor usage of cold weapons and vehicles which were negligible in the total number of attacks. Vehicle-borne explosives were used 41 times, making it 17.08% of all attacks made with explosives. This evidence suggests that the operational capability of the group was at a relatively high level in the six months before al-Baghdadi was killed because it was able to use explosives in the majority of its attacks.

⁵ Multiple weapon types could have been used during one attack. Only a two digit decimal value was used during the calculation of percentage.

Figure 5: Weapon Type Used Prior to al-Baghdadi's Death

| | Explosives | Firearms | Melee | Vehicle |
|----|------------|----------|-------|---------|
| 1) | 240 | 211 | 11 | 0 |
| 2) | 51.06% | 44.89% | 2.34% | 0% |
| 3) | 60% | 52.75% | 2.75% | 0% |

| Explosives Subtype | |
|--------------------|--------|
| VBIED | PBIED |
| 41 | 98 |
| 17.08% | 40.83% |

1) Number of Occurrences 2) Percentage from other occurrences 3) Percentage from attacks

Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

Lastly, data of weapon type from the post-operational time period will be examined. According to available data presented in Figure 6, explosives were used exactly in 100 cases of terrorist attacks and the use of firearms occurred in 196 cases. There is an obvious decrease in the use of explosives after the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in comparison to the previous six-month period. The use of explosives appeared in 37.31% of all attacks in the examined period. The decline is quite noticeable compared to previously observed 60% occurrence. The use of explosives seems to be substituted with the use of firearms which increased from the previous 52.75% occurrence to being used in 73.13% of all terrorist attacks. This finding confirms Klein's (2022) suggestion that a shift of resources should be expected after targeting a terrorist leader. In this case, the shift of resources was projected to a decrease in the use of explosives. Interestingly, the use of melee weapons and vehicles remained almost at the same insignificant level. The use of VBIED decreased as well, representing only a 10% share of the overall number of explosives. Quite a surprising result is provided by the number of PBIED which were used in 87% of all attacks with the use of explosive weapons. Compared to previously observed 40.83%, this significant increase of suicide bombing might signal that the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did not lower the morale of his fighters in terms of their willingness of giving their life for their ideology. In fact, quite the opposite was achieved. Even though the Islamic State did not

carry out as much attacks after al-Baghdadi’s death as it did in the previous six months, their use of suicide bombing proportionally increased by 46.17%.

Figure 6: Weapon Type Used After al-Baghdadi’s Death

| | Explosives | Firearms | Melee | Vehicle |
|----|------------|----------|-------|---------|
| 1) | 100 | 196 | 6 | 1 |
| 2) | 32.05% | 62.82% | 1.92% | 0.32% |
| 3) | 37.31% | 73.13% | 2.23% | 0.37% |

| Explosives Subtype | |
|--------------------|-------|
| VBIED | PBIED |
| 10 | 87 |
| 10% | 87% |

1) Number of Occurrences 2) Percentage from other occurrences 3) Percentage from attacks

Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

This finding is consistent with research by Jaeger and Paserman (2009: 339–341), who also presented evidence that low-intensity targeted killing by Israel led to elevated activity of Palestinian movements in suicide bombing during the Second Intifada.

2.2.2 Analysis of Qualitative Indicators

Studying quantitative data described in the previous subchapter stand-alone without deeper context and understanding of the societal situation and political background could result in some misleading deductions. This subchapter will provide a wider picture of the counterterrorism measures that were in effect against the Islamic State in the examined time period in order to evaluate the targeted killing operation more objectively. The popular support for the Islamic State and its strategy will be also analyzed for better understanding of certain phenomena discovered in the previous part of this analysis.

When applying repressive counterterrorism measures, a government must acknowledge the potential negative impact of these actions on the population. If the government pursues a certain goal at the expense of the population and imposes hardship on it, there is a risk that these counterterrorism actions will create an environment that is beneficial for the popularity

of the terrorist group. This phenomenon was studied by Mesquita and Dickson (2007: 365–366) and they presented a theory according to which certain terrorist violence can provoke government counterterrorism actions that ultimately increase support for the militant movement amongst the public. Perhaps this provides some partial explanation for the instance of increase in the use of suicide bombing by the Islamic State after targeting their leadership. The group might have been employing this tactic to provoke a disproportionate reaction that would radicalize the population and justify the means of the terrorist group.

When evaluating the impact of this particular instance of leadership decapitation on the Islamic State, the overall length of the counterterrorism campaign against the group must be considered. The United States, along with its allies, started Operation Inherent Resolve in 2014, with the goal of combating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Thousands of airstrikes were carried out during the operation as well as ground operations. The cost of the operation just in the time period between 2014 and 2017 was 14.3 billion dollars and was active during three different presidential cabinets (U.S. Department of Defense 2017). The presence of the US forces in the region managed to establish an intelligence network that was cultivated over the years and proved to be crucial for tracing the movement of the Islamic State. This helps to understand the persistence of the counterterrorism efforts of the United States against this particular terrorist group. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was not the only leading figure of the Islamic State that was targeted, although his death is perceived as a major success of the operation due to his importance. As mentioned above, his spokesman was killed shortly after the raid on al-Baghdadi in Idlib. Nevertheless, his death or the death of his successor al-Qurayshi certainly are not the last leadership decapitations that the group will have to experience.

The public opinion on any governmental policy is crucial for its legitimacy, let alone operations on foreign soil. Even though the Islamic State was on a rise in 2014, sending troops to fight the terrorist group when they seized control of Mosul had support of only 17%. The public opinion dramatically shifted after the Islamic State launched its campaign of broadcasted beheadings of abducted foreign citizens. At that moment, the public support of this policy rose to 40% and in 2015 even to 60% (Mueller 2021: 9). Although the Islamic State might have not posed such a threat on the American continent, it succeeded in picturing itself as a major security threat not only to the American public through its use of media.

Barack Obama (as cited in Baker 2014) marked this decision of ISIS as a strategic mistake because it angered the population which was suddenly willing to support military action abroad.

Counterterrorism efforts of the United States in the Middle East culminated during the presidency of Donald Trump during which his administration was able to declare a territorial defeat of the Islamic State and shortly after succeeded in tracking and killing its leader. The assumption that the terrorist group no longer posed that much of a threat combined with Trump's America First agenda came to the decision of withdrawing US forces from Northern Syria in October 2019. As a poll by Newall and Jackson (2019) shows, the opinion of the public was strongly divided on this matter with 58% of the American public disapproving of the decision to withdraw the US contingent from Syria. One of their main concerns was the threat posed by the Islamic State amongst reports by Syrian Kurdish forces that hundreds of ISIS prisoners were escaping due to fighting caused by subsequent Turkish intervention. The decision to abandon Kurdish forces was perceived as a step that would damage the counterterrorism progress that was made over the years and could potentially increase the number of terrorist attacks (Byman 2019). This decision was ultimately reversed and instead of a full withdrawal, the force was only relocated. It is still present in Northeast Syria, albeit its size was substantially reduced (Roebuck 2023).

Although the announcement of the withdrawal from Northern Syria does not seem to have any correlation with the frequency of terrorist attacks nor casualties, it might be related to the increase of attacks on hard targets which started being evident from December 2019. Perhaps it was also a result of Donald Trump's often repeated misconception that the Islamic State was defeated, even though it was obvious that the ideology was on rise in multiple regions (Paquette – Mekhennet – Warrick 2020). The changing position of the United States weakened counterterrorism efforts of their partners, causing the African provinces of the Islamic State to quickly surpass their Middle Eastern core in terms of military power. This was demonstrated by increasing clashes with local militaries which struggled particularly against the increasing force of the Islamic State West Africa Province and the Islamic State Central Africa Province (Rolbiecki – Ostaeyen – Winter 2020: 31–37).

The data on the public support of ISIS are limited and they lack complexity compared to polls of public views in the US, for instance. It must occur as no surprise that in Syria the

percentage of population supporting the Islamic State will not be imperceptible. A study from October 2019 shows that 57% of interviewed residents from Raqqa and Hasakah would prefer living under the rule of ISIS instead of being governed by Assad's regime. Even though 62% of respondents thought it is likely that the Islamic State would increase its control in the upcoming months after the announced shift of the US priorities, only 24% believed that the International Coalition against ISIS had positive influence in the region and only 10% thought the same about the US (Gallup International 2019).⁶ This clearly illustrates how difficult the situation in the region is due to the lack of a functioning government which would distribute the necessary goods to the population, leaving the residents with a difficult choice between governance by a repressive terrorist organization and a totalitarian government, whilst also having to withstand foreign interventions at the same time, whether it is pressure from Turkey, the US, Russia or Iran.

As for the opinion of Syrians on the presence of the United States in the country, it was never completely positive and the death of al-Baghdadi did not really change how Syrians perceive the US. The death of the leader of ISIS was viewed positively by people from Iraq and Syria, although they acknowledged that he was killed by the US, which is also responsible for the suffering of their families (Estrin 2019).

In Iraq, expectations of the resurgence of ISIS were also high as the country dealt with the structural damage the group had left behind. A study by Oxfam (2020: 14–16) shows that fear of attacks by armed groups is still a prevalent security concern, although the Islamic State is responsible for attacks only in one third of the researched cities. It appears that there is still a large number of people somehow affiliated to the terrorist group. Some sources estimated up to 100 000 people with ties to the organization, but the vast majority of them are likely family members of ISIS fighters (Wille 2018).

During the peak of its power, the highest support for the group was measured in Syria where 21% of the population had viewed it favorably. The second highest positive opinion on the Islamic State was measured in Nigeria (Poushter 2015). This largely corresponds to the environment of active conflicts that both of these countries represent where the group

⁶ The representative sample of this poll included face-to-face interviews with 601 adults from the Syrian cities (Gallup 2019). This research certainly has its limitations considering the size of the sample as well as possible distrust of the respondents combined with the fear of revenge for voicing their disagreement with the Islamic State, considering the influence the militant group recently had in those cities.

challenges local governments. The result of this poll can be either explained as a factual support for the group, or just an opposition to local authorities. The Islamic State never had a full support of the communities it ruled over, even the Sunni, whom it posed to be a guardian of, later wanted to get rid of its influence. According to Hasan (as cited in Lister 2014: 14), al-Baghdadi made a mistake by declaring a caliphate, because it would imply a unity of the Muslim community which would willingly pledge allegiance to him and that did not happen. The group subjugated the population by force and destroyed any notion of Muslim unity. He thinks the group should have rather established an Islamic emirate which might have gained more support due to its limited territorial interpretation.

An important factor for evaluation of effectiveness of this counterterrorism operation is also the diplomatic impact of this intervention on foreign soil and any political repercussions have to be taken into account. Syria and the United States ceased their official diplomatic relations in 2012 when the US Embassy in Damascus suspended operations, this was followed by the Syrian diplomatic mission leaving the United States in 2014. Syria is under various economic sanctions which began in 2004 and are in effect up to this day (U.S. Department of State 2021). Although the US supports Syria with humanitarian aid and cooperates against the Islamic State, there is no official diplomatic relation that could have been damaged by the US operation during which several Syrian nationals were killed. Reaction came only from the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces that were cooperating with the United States and assisted them during the operation. Leader of the SDF Abdi (as cited in AFP 2020) confirmed that the death of al-Baghdadi had resulted from joint intelligence work and warned about potential retaliatory attacks. There seems to be no significant reaction to the event by the Syrian government, let alone any political fallout caused by the strike.

2.3 Second Case: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden

Osama Bin Laden came from a very prominent background. His father was a Saudi billionaire and he had a degree in civil engineering and further studied management, expecting to use his knowledge in the family business. Bin Laden chose a different path as he met a radical Islamist professor with whom he created a recruitment network for jihadists to fight against the Soviet Union that was occupying Afghanistan. He himself later joined the newly formed Mujahideen in Afghanistan and contributed to the movement with wealth he inherited from his father, quickly becoming a respected leader (Post 2002: 3–4). After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Jihadist movement of Bin Laden expanded, establishing al-Qaeda with Ayman al-Zawahiri, who remained in the highest echelons of the group until 2022 when he was also killed.

Al-Qaeda's influence culminated in 2001 under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden after it managed to execute the largest terrorist attack in history, killing almost 3 thousand Americans (National September 11 Memorial & Museum 2023). One of the main factors behind the initial success of the terrorist group was certainly Bin Laden's charisma as a leader and his management abilities that allowed him to maintain a terrorist group of such a scale. Although al-Qaeda had a very distinctive structure consisting of its core and affiliated branches which were not necessarily always under the full control of al-Qaeda Central, Bin Laden always wanted to maintain communication and provide personal advice even if there were disputes over strategy (Lahoud et al. 2012: 1–3). As Byman (2022) notes, the rise and fall of terrorist groups often depends on the quality of their leadership and the state of al-Qaeda today clearly illustrates that al-Zawahiri was not able to substitute the personality of Bin Laden in the leadership of the organization. Briefly after Osama Bin Laden's death, experts were predicting that the laconic character of al-Zawahiri will put jihadists under pressure due to the lack of inspiration from their new leadership (Musharbash 2011). One of the reasons that al-Qaeda decentralized even more and was sidelined by the emergence of the Islamic State was the fact that al-Zawahiri was unable to motivate new jihadists as he rarely appeared in the public, causing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to reject al-Qaeda's authority, offering an alternative to the jihadist ideology, further dividing the movement (Byman – Williams 2015; Lister 2017: 13).

The US intelligence community searched for Osama Bin Laden for many years without success. The Bush administration employed the controversial Enhanced Interrogation Program on alleged al-Qaeda operatives in order to extract information about potential imminent attacks and information leading to Bin Laden. The use of such techniques on detainees was deeply criticized and although the CIA eventually obtained information leading to Abu Ahmad al-Kuwaiti, the al-Qaeda courier that led them to Bin Laden, there are reasonable doubts whether the information could have not been obtained through different means (Kessler 2018; Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2014). When the US intelligence located a compound in Pakistani Abbottabad, which the courier regularly visited, they estimated only a 55% chance that Osama Bin Laden was hiding there, yet they decided to raid it (Osborn – Lin 2023). One of the discussed options was destroying the complex with an airstrike of such a scale that any potential underground bunkers would also be penetrated. However, not only would it make the identification of Bin Laden's body impossible, the surrounding residential area would also suffer substantial damage (Napier 2021).

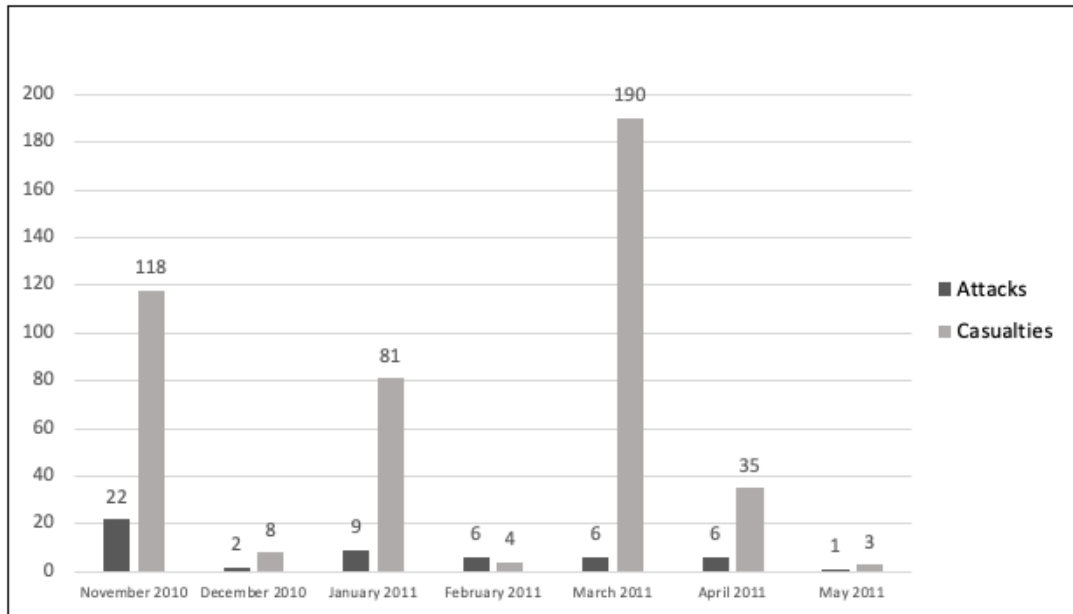
On May 1, 2011, The SEAL Team Six, supported by the Special Operations Aviation Regiment, were deployed from Afghanistan into Pakistan with the mission to kill or capture the leader of al-Qaeda. This was a particularly sensitive operation as the US forces invaded the airspace of a sovereign nation unauthorized (Quade 2022). During the operation, the forces were met with resistance at the compound and before finding Bin Laden, they managed to kill al-Awlaki along with another courier and Bin Laden's son. However, one woman from the building was killed as she got caught in the firefight (Napier 2021). Few hours later, president Obama addressed the nation and announced the death of the leader of al-Qaeda (The White House 2011). The killing of Osama Bin Laden was perceived as a major success in counterterrorism efforts of the United States mainly due to its symbolic value. The following chapter will now analyze the impact of this action on the operational capability of al-Qaeda in order to provide a factual evaluation of the effectiveness of this action based on previously defined criteria.

2.3.1 Analysis of Quantitative Indicators

The same set of indicators that was presented beforehand will be analyzed, covering the time period of six months prior to the leadership decapitation of al-Qaeda and six months after

the operation to determine the impact it had on the group’s ability to inflict damage. Beginning with the frequency of terrorist attacks and casualties prior to Osama Bin Laden’s death, al-Qaeda and its network successfully carried out 52 terrorist attacks accounting for a total of 439 casualties.

Figure 7: The Number of al-Qaeda Attacks and Casualties Prior to Osama Bin Laden’s death



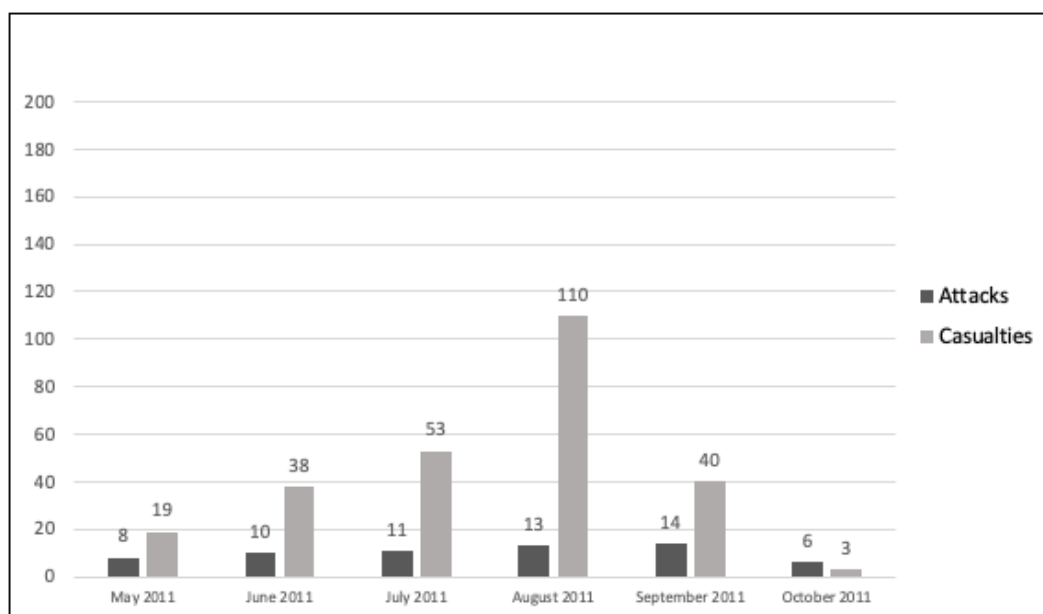
Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

The examination of Figure 7 shows that there does not seem to be any apparent pattern regarding the frequency of terrorist attacks with the exception of November 2010 where the number of attacks reached 22. However, the number of casualties seems to have spiked every other month, reaching the highest value in March 2011 with 190 casualties. According to GTD, the deadliest terrorist attack took place in March, when al-Qaeda raided an ammunition factory in Yemen, where an explosion occurred later, killing civilians as they entered the complex to steal military supplies amidst the chaos. Although the GTD attributed the responsibility for the casualties to al-Qaeda as they might have left an IED behind, some sources also speculate that the tragic event might have been caused by irresponsible handling of stolen ammunition by civilians (VOA News 2011; CNN 2011). The terrorist group managed to carry out three other major attacks in the examined period, both being later claimed by the group. These attacks took place in Iraq and each left over 50 dead. In November 2010, al-Qaeda in Iraq carried out a series of bombings in Baghdad (Chulov 2010). Then in January 2011, al-Qaeda attacked a recruitment facility of the police, while in

March, the militant group stormed a local council building in Tikrit (France 24 2011a; France 24 2011b). All of these attacks illustrate that the group was very active and able to contest local governments by attacking their facilities. On average, al-Qaeda executed 0.28 attacks per day.

In the six-month time period after the leadership decapitation of al-Qaeda, the group conducted 62 terrorist attacks with 263 casualties. The frequency of attacks actually increased by 19.23%, rising to the average of 0.33 attacks per day. Figure 8 reveals that the frequency of attacks became relatively stable, without any noticeable deviations. Despite the fact that the number of attacks increased, the casualty rate actually decreased by 40.01% after Bin Laden’s death. There seems to be a rising trend that began with Bin Laden’s death in May 2011 and culminated in August, reaching 110 casualties. However, none of these attacks was of such a scale as in the previous time period because the casualties of the major attacks never surpassed 15 civilian lives.

Figure 8: The Number of al-Qaeda Attacks and Casualties After Osama Bin Laden’s death



Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

While the largest incident that was recorded in August 2011 resulted in 36 deaths, 26 of those were reportedly al-Qaeda militants that were killed during a clash with the military in Yemen in the midst of a campaign to liberate territories held by the group (Al-Haj 2011). The GTD documented at least another two incidents during which the majority of casualties

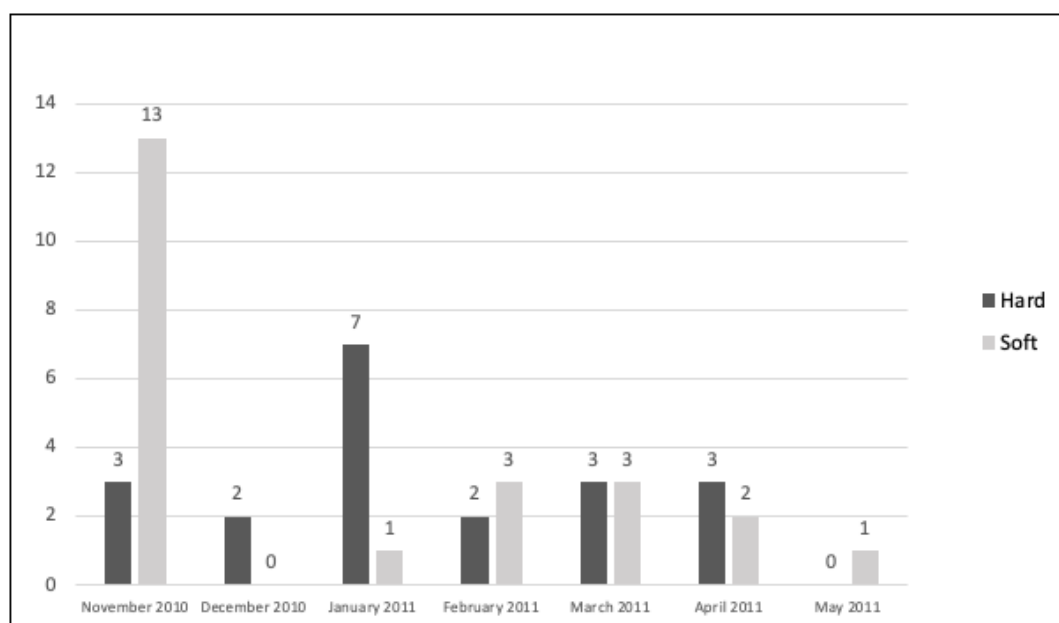
were members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Henceforth, there were even less civilian casualties in the analyzed time period due to this circumstance. Noteworthy, the increasing number of casualties amongst militants was observable only after the death of Osama Bin Laden. This was mainly due to the counterterrorism offensive launched by the Yemeni military supported by local tribes to defeat al-Qaeda militants that were gaining an increasing foothold in the south of the country (Raghavan 2011; Reuters 2011a). Although the US did not take part in the ground operations, it largely contributed with its airpower capabilities such as UCAV and cruise missiles (McGregor 2011). During this campaign, another major successful targeted killing was executed in September 2011, when a drone strike by the United States in Yemen managed to kill Anwar al-Awlaki, whose case was described in the first chapter. Al-Awlaki was a leading figure of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula with an increasingly important role due to his inspirational and charismatic voice (Zenko 2011). This was perceived as another important milestone in the Global War on Terrorism waged by the United States.

The decrease of civilian casualties can be explained both by the loss of operational capability due to the strong pressure by counterterrorism operations as well as a shift in al-Qaeda's strategy. A study by Bomfim (2020) shows that as the group became more decentralized, the average civilian casualties of its attacks decreased. Bomfim explains her findings by al-Zawahiri's aim at strengthening the group in its decentralized form while avoiding excessive attention of the West. He tried to achieve this by forbearing attacks with the potential of high civilian casualties to avoid killing Muslims, distancing the group from the behavior of ISIS. This coincides with findings presented in this analysis regarding the decline in casualties after Osama Bin Laden's death. Al-Qaeda's most famous operation during Bin Laden's leadership was the hijacking of planes that crashed into the World Trade Center, while al-Zawahiri's biggest attack was the shooting of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. As Tasso (2022) points out, al-Qaeda's ambition during the latter leadership decreased by a significant margin.

Type of target is the next quantitative indicator that is to be analyzed in this chapter. In the last six months of Osama Bin Laden's leadership, al-Qaeda carried out 20 attacks on hard

targets.⁷ Soft targets were targeted 23 times, meaning that the distribution of targets was almost equal. As Figure 9 illustrates, the only month where the choice of soft targets prevailed quite drastically was November 2010, during which the group attacked soft targets on 13 occasions. However, most of these attacks were part of a series of bombings carried out by al-Qaeda in Iraq targeting Shia neighborhoods in Baghdad (Chulov 2010). In January 2011, the number of attacks on hard targets experienced a peak. This was mostly due to the activity of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula against the Yemeni military. As for the rest of this time period, the ratio of target types remained relatively balanced.

Figure 9: Type of Target Prior to Bin Laden’s Death



Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

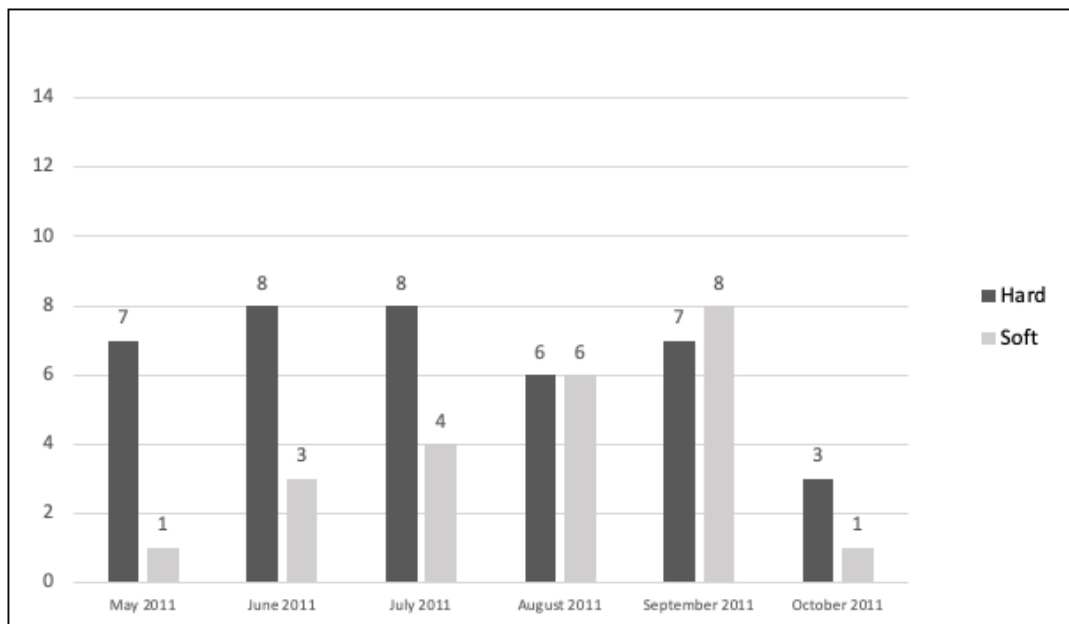
In the following analyzed period, starting from the second of May 2011, al-Qaeda and its network attacked soft targets a total of 23 times, while the number of attacks on hard targets reached 39. This means that the share of soft targets remained at the same value in both examined periods, while the number of hard targets substantially increased. Protected targets were subjected to attacks in 62.90% of all of the group’s operations, compared to being targeted only in 38.46% in the previous period. This data signals that hard targets clearly became a priority for the group after Bin Laden’s death. Figure 10 illustrates that hard targets

⁷ Some types of targets were left out due to their irrelevance for this research. Those were other terrorist groups, violent political parties and unknown targets. Multiple target types could have been targeted during one attack.

started being dominant over soft targets as soon as May 2011, maintaining the trend until September.

It is likely that the explanation for this finding can be also offered by the change of leadership and al-Zawahiri's new strategy that was trying to minimize civilian casualties. They were certainly aware that another consequent leadership decapitation would considerably undermine al-Qaeda's authority so they rather chose to clash with local governmental forces on the level of an insurgency, hoping that they would stay out of the scope of Western counterterrorism campaigns by not engaging in indiscriminate violence against civilians.

Figure 10: Type of Target After Bin Laden's Death



Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

Figure 11: Weapon Type Used Prior to Bin Laden’s Death

| | Explosives | Firearms | Melee | Vehicle |
|----|------------|----------|-------|---------|
| 1) | 32 | 36 | 0 | 0 |
| 2) | 53.33% | 60% | 0% | 0% |
| 3) | 61.53% | 69.23% | 0% | 0% |

| Explosives Subtype | |
|--------------------|-------|
| VBIED | PBIED |
| 6 | 8 |
| 18.75% | 25% |

1) Number of occurrences 2) Percentage from other occurrences 3) Percentage from attacks

Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

The last indicator subjected to analysis is the type of weapon used during attacks.⁸ Figure 11 illustrates the most common weapon types al-Qaeda used in the time period prior to the leadership decapitation. Firearms were the dominant type of weapon with 36 overall occurrences, while explosives were right behind with 32 documented cases. There were no incidents where the militants would use the cheapest available weapons such as melee weapons or vehicles. Vehicle-borne explosives were used six times while attacks using person-borne explosives were recorded on 8 occasions.

It is the second examined period that puts those values into context. Figure 12 reveals that the use of firearms surprisingly decreased from being used in 69.23% of all attacks to just 38.70%. While the number of explosive attacks fell from 32 to just 30, it must be noted that the number of attacks in the time period after the decapitation actually increased, thus the use of explosives percentually decreased. However, they were dominant to firearms, meaning that in its operations, the group preferred the use of explosives over firearms. Furthermore, there is an apparent increase of the use of vehicle-borne explosives. The number of attacks using VBIED doubled in comparison to the previous period, rising from 18.78% of occurrences amongst all attacks using explosives to 40%. This finding is contrary

⁸ Multiple weapon types could have been used during one attack. Only a two digit decimal value was used during the calculation of percentage.

to the assumption that groups subjected to leadership decapitation are less likely to use expensive resources during their attacks.

Figure 12: Weapon Type Used After Bin Laden’s Death

| | Explosives | Firearms | Melee | Vehicle |
|----|------------|----------|-------|---------|
| 1) | 30 | 24 | 1 | 0 |
| 2) | 44.11% | 35.29% | 1.47% | 0% |
| 3) | 48.38% | 38.70% | 1.61% | 0% |

| Explosives Subtype | |
|--------------------|--------|
| VBIED | PBIED |
| 12 | 14 |
| 40% | 46.66% |

1) Number of occurrences 2) Percentage from other occurrences 3) Percentage from attacks

Source: Figure created by author from The Global Terrorism Database 2022

Suicide bombings became more frequent as well, increasing from being 25% of all explosive attacks to 46.66%. This result once again confirms the findings of other authors that certain forms of leadership decapitation may increase the use of suicide bombing as a form of retaliation (David 2002: 9; Jaeger – Paserman 2009: 339–341; Ganor 2012: 2–3). Interestingly, just like in the previous period, the numbers of melee and vehicle attacks were also extremely insignificant, not pointing out any trends whatsoever.

2.3.2 Analysis of Qualitative Indicators

This subchapter is dedicated to the analysis of some qualitative indicators that might offer better understanding of the general position of al-Qaeda after the operation, as there are various factors that might have contributed to its development. The general counterterrorism efforts of the United States must be taken into account, considering the two-decade-long Global War on Terror that was launched against the group. The public opinion will be also mentioned briefly, as well as the response of the Pakistani government since the operation took place on its sovereign territory.

After the 9/11 attack, the Bush Administration launched the so-called Global War on Terror, which started with combating al-Qaeda, but went much further than that (George W. Bush Library 2023). There were various operations launched in the frame of the Global War on Terror, such as Operation Enduring Freedom aimed at suppressing al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan, or Operation New Dawn focused on insurgencies in Iraq. Some estimate the total cost of these post 9/11 US operations at 8 trillion US dollars (Savell – Lutz – Crawford 2021). By 2010, the United States managed to largely push al-Qaeda out of Iraq and Afghanistan, but the group was not yet defeated and many of its fighters and commanders have taken refuge in Pakistan which became their safe haven. Although Pakistan pressured extremist groups on its borders by offensives, it caused concerns that al-Qaeda would be driven into Pakistani cities where they would be hard to locate and would also contribute to growing anti-American sentiment amongst the population (United States Senate 2010).

The US intervention against al-Qaeda was never viewed positively by Muslims. They were mostly outraged and concerned with the presence of US forces in the Middle East. A research by Gunaratna and Karunya (2011: 201–203) shows that a majority of surveyed Muslim communities in 2004 demonstrated hostility towards the US foreign policies such as the invasion of Iraq. It was not uncommon that some respondents viewed attacks on Americans as justified, even though they did not approve Bin Laden's messages. Although the negative attitude towards the United States in some countries such as Pakistan persists, it slightly improved throughout the years as the violence caused by radical extremists and insurgents increased.

After 2011, al-Qaeda was experiencing certain instability and decentralization. In order to recover from this situation, the group attempted to soften its image and the leadership encouraged its affiliates to engage in local conflicts instead of global terrorism, switching to a long-term jihadist strategy focused mainly on pragmatism (Lister 2017: 1). Meanwhile, al-Qaeda in Iraq transformed into the Islamic State in Iraq, disavowing its loyalty to the new leadership of al-Qaeda Central. Although there were not many differences in the ultimate goals of both groups, their strategies differed radically. Al-Qaeda reoriented itself locally, while maintaining its anti-western rhetoric. The Islamic State exploited this by pointing out the contradictions in al-Qaeda's messages, gaining popularity amongst new

jihadists due to its violence and the pursuit of immediate results (Orton 2023: 19). On the other hand, this was an opportunity for al-Qaeda to cleanse its image by rejecting the mass violence ISI was engaging in, hoping that they would minimize the counterterrorism interference as al-Qaeda was now the moderate party in this competition.

Al-Qaeda was never able to regain its strength after 2011. This is mainly due to the factor of leadership. The authority of al-Zawahiri was limited only to being the pick of Bin Laden. He was perceived only as a deputy of the charismatic leader as he did not possess the heroic reputation and history that was typical to leading jihadi figures (Ingram – Whiteside 2022). There were also some notable shifts in the areas where al-Qaeda operated after the culmination of the counterterrorism campaign of the United States. Most importantly, Iraq started being dominated by the Islamic State and so al-Qaeda strengthened its presence in Yemen, where it took advantage of the revolution and thrived due to the limited reach of the central government. Later, the group also shifted its focus into Africa, where it increased its operations in Mali and Somalia (Bomfim 2020). As Orton (2023: 24) notes, it is difficult to imagine that the Islamic State would be able to challenge al-Qaeda while Bin Laden was alive. According to him, the group was held together by his charisma and earlier also by his wealth, which was not something al-Zawahiri could offer as he had no significant military or scholarly credentials.

Changes in the public opinion can be helpful in understanding whether a counterterrorism policy was indeed successful as it affected the population and their living conditions either positively or negatively. This is likely to be projected into the popular support of the terrorist group and also of the government that launched the intervention against it. A study by Pew Research Center (2010) mapped the development of Bin Laden's popularity from 2003 to 2010. According to their research, his popularity amongst Muslims gradually decreased in all surveyed communities with the exception of Nigeria, where the confidence in Osama Bin Laden rose from 45% of the Muslim population to 48%.⁹ Interestingly, Pakistan was also amidst the countries where Bin Laden's popularity decreased, falling from being viewed positively by 46% of Pakistani Muslims in 2003 to only 18% in 2010. In the same year, the popularity of al-Qaeda itself was the highest also in Nigeria where it was viewed favorably by 49% of the population. Jordanian public was second with 34% approval rate of the

⁹ Muslim populations from 7 countries were surveyed in this research, excluding Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria.

terrorist organization. However, al-Qaeda was not as favored as Hamas and Hezbollah in these states.

Another survey by Pew Research Center (2013) shows that after the death of Bin Laden, al-Qaeda was viewed unfavorably by 57% of the Muslim population, ranking its popularity once again below Hamas, Hezbollah and even Taliban.¹⁰ The most favorable opinion on the group was observed amongst residents of the Palestinian territories, where 35% of the inhabitants approved the group. This was followed by Indonesia where the group was favored by 23% of the public. It is clear that al-Qaeda's popularity started decreasing when Bin Laden was still alive, dropping even more after his death in 2011. Perhaps the most important factor that contributed to the fall of al-Qaeda was the change of leadership after Bin Laden's death that left many jihadists dissatisfied with the new direction of the group that was set by Ayman al-Zawahiri. But criticism of both leaders surfaced even earlier. In 2009, an influential jihadist Dr. Fadl blamed the group for sparking sectarian violence in Iraq, bearing responsibility for mass killings of Muslims. According to him, al-Qaeda no longer had the capacity to fight the West (May 2009). The organization certainly realized that this criticism is not far from reality, but altering the course of the group might have come a bit too late as the damage was already done.

Although there is not hard evidence that the Pakistani government or the ISI had any knowledge about the fact that Bin Laden was hiding in the country for several years, there were many aspects of his stay that were likely to attract attention, ranging from unusual transactions to his suspicious compound that was located just half a mile from a military academy (Riedel 2013). There are also speculations (Hersh 2015) that the Pakistani government was complicit in hiding Bin Laden but some of its officials gave his location away in order to keep the flow of US aid to the country. According to a former Pakistani Ambassador to the United States Haqqani (2015), Operation Neptune Spear led to utmost embarrassment of Pakistani generals for two reasons. First, Bin Laden was found on their territory and they were concerned that they would be accused of harboring him, violating UN Security Council Resolutions regarding sanctioned individuals, and second, the raid took place without their knowledge or approval, undermining their sovereignty.

¹⁰ This study surveyed 11 Muslim publics throughout the world, but Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria were also excluded. The value represents the median of answers (Pew Research Center 2013).

After the incident, the US-Pakistani relations significantly worsened as Pakistan was upset about the US breaching their sovereign territory. After the raid in Abbottabad, the United States demanded material from Bin Laden's compound as well as the remains of their Black Hawk helicopter that crashed during the operation and had to be left behind. But before Pakistan allowed the US to retrieve the wreckage, the Pakistani intelligence agency allegedly allowed Chinese specialists to inspect the aircraft that was equipped with stealth technology (Siddique 2011). Furthermore, Pakistan penalized the US by limiting CIA operations in the country, reducing the number of US military trainers and cutting visas for US personnel. On top of that, the United States responded by suspending about a third of its annual defense aid to the country, holding back 800 million US dollars (Reuters 2011b; Rakisits 2011). Thus, the political fallout of the Operation Neptune Spear was quite high and bilateral relations of both countries experienced high tensions. But diplomatic channels remained open and the relationship soon recovered as both countries realized the potential of their partnership in the fight against extremism in the region.

Cross-Case Findings and Discussion

There are many similar aspects that appeared in both case studies and from which some inferences regarding leadership decapitation are to be drawn. It is important to repeat that all of the observed effects of targeted killing were happening in a short-term period and do not necessarily represent long-term trends which were not a scope of this study.

In the case of the Islamic State, leadership decapitation reduced the number of terrorist attacks, but ultimately did not succeed in lowering the casualty rate. However, there was a decrease in soft targets which were substituted by hard targets. On the other hand, the death of al-Qaeda's leader did not lower the number of attacks but managed to substantially decrease the number of casualties. Although the number of soft targets remained the same, attacks on hard targets became a priority as well. These findings lead to a completely different implication than the study by Abrahms and Potter (2015: 328–330). According to their data, an increase of soft targets should be expected after leadership decapitation. This points out to the fact that both groups became increasingly active in Africa where they engaged in conflicts with local militias and governmental forces. In both cases, intense counterterrorism campaigns were ongoing against the militant groups, yet the decapitation had clearly a stronger impact on al-Qaeda's operational capability.

Interestingly, findings from this case study are contrary to an analysis by Fisher – (2023), in which they presented evidence that the killing of Osama Bin Laden coincides with increases in the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks in various countries. Unlike the conclusion from this study, they inclined towards the version that this particular instance of leadership decapitation caused retaliation and thus caused more problems in general. However, their methodology significantly differed as they studied global terrorism trends rather than just one specific group. They also examined a broader time period which included seven years in total, following rather medium-term patterns. Still, they managed to provide interesting results that complement findings from this case study, offering a broader point of view on the matter of counterterrorism.

The analysis of weapon types used in attacks has also shown some similarities. In both cases, it was confirmed that a reduced operational capability of a terrorist group could be inferred from a decrease in their use of explosives, validating the assumption. The occurrence of

explosives in terrorist attacks of the Islamic State dropped by more than 20% after the leadership decapitation. In the case of al-Qaeda, the downturn of explosive attacks was not as severe, but it still fell by more than 12%. As for suicide attacks, there seems to be evidence from both case studies to believe that decapitation of important terrorist figures contributes to the increased use of person-borne explosives during terrorist attacks in the short-time period after leadership decapitation. In the case of the Islamic State, the share of suicide attacks from the total number of attacks using explosives increased by more than 40% while in the case of al-Qaeda it was over 20%.

An interesting comparison to these results of suicide attacks is provided by Klein (2022), who claimed that under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State carried out more suicide attacks compared to the time period of his successor al-Qurayshi, where he noticed a significant decline which he attributed to the leadership decapitation. Whilst Klein's findings offer a deeper analysis of all attacks during al-Baghdadi's rule, where he claims suicide attacks constituted for 10% of all attacks, he analyzed only 2 months after his death, which might not have been enough to gather comparable results. The difference in the analyzed time-frame is probably why the six-month time period examined in this study revealed different findings than Klein.

The data regarding the frequency of using vehicle-borne explosives is not so revealing. In the case of al-Qaeda, the number of VBIED attacks actually increased, while in the case of the Islamic State there was a slight decrease. Although this terrorist tactic is not used so often compared to other methods, it is a dangerous weapon and understanding whether there is any correlation with targeted killing would be beneficial for the discipline of counterterrorism. Under closer examination of incidents where al-Qaeda used vehicle-borne explosives, an equal amount of those attacks in both time periods were suicide attacks, ruling out the possibility that the increase would be explained in the same fashion as the surge of person-borne explosive attacks. It is not clear whether this is only a statistical deviation but it is not possible to make a convincing inference from those findings.

The analysis of the use of firearms by examined terrorist groups after being subjected to decapitation does not seem to offer homogenous results but still manages to uncover some trends. The case of the Islamic State shows that the use of firearms increased by slightly over 20% which coincides with the decreasing use of explosives, suggesting that firearms

substituted explosives due to their availability and price. This finding contributes to the premise that leadership decapitation forces groups to relocate resources from offense to defense, albeit stating that those resources were relocated to the protection of important leaders would be a speculation. Interestingly, al-Qaeda exhibited a decrease in the use of explosives and firearms subsequently, which means that they used overall less weapons in their attacks. This could possibly point out to the fact that the strike hindered al-Qaeda's operational capability even more effectively.

The amount of occurrences of cold weapons and vehicles used as weapons in terrorist attacks managed to prove that there is no evident correlation between targeted killing and the use of the cheapest possible weaponry such as cold weapons and vehicles, at least for large terrorist organizations as were the cases studied in this analysis. Thus, the shift of resources after leadership decapitation might limit the use of explosives, but it is not likely going to affect the group in such a scale that it would consider using vehicles or knives more often.

Conclusion

This study analyzed two cases of targeted killing from the perspective of leadership decapitation theory. Both cases had many similarities although they were apart from each other by more than eighteen years. The goal of this thesis was to assess the effectiveness of the targeted killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, former leader of the Islamic State, and Osama Bin Laden, former leader of al-Qaeda, and to analyze the impact that each strike had on the terrorist group and its operational capability. Previous research on this topic presented mostly conflicting results on the use of leadership decapitation and so there was an expectation that this analysis will also provide ambiguous results. It was ultimately confirmed that the outcome of targeted killing is highly uncertain and numerous factors must be taken into account before implementing this strategy in counterterrorism. Moreover, moral and legal aspects of targeted killing were also briefly mentioned in this study, outlining some general laws that should be abided, such as avoiding unnecessary civilian casualties, because disobedience of basic humanitarian principles can endanger the legitimacy of the operation.

The results from this analysis suggest that the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did not manage to decrease the operational capability of the Islamic State to a point where it would hinder its ability to cause damage. In the six months after his death, the group caused even more casualties in their terrorist attacks, albeit their intensity decreased. This is perhaps the most important factor that describes the operational capability of a terrorist group, regardless of the frequency of attacks or used resources. Furthermore, the number of suicide attacks increased after the operation, which by any means does not indicate declining morale of the militants. Moreover, it suggests that the act of decapitation may have provoked a retaliatory response and contributed to further radicalization of jihadist fighters. But it would not be fair to declare this operation unsuccessful in general if the primary goal of the US administration was only to oust the Islamic State from Iraq and Syria. In that manner, they certainly succeeded, although it was achieved gradually with a combination of intense ground operations and other targeted killings.

Nonetheless, the Islamic State formally recognized various new branches which increased their operations primarily in Africa, South and Southeast Asia, where they grasped new opportunities and simultaneously created new challenges for the global counterterrorism

efforts (Bureau of Counterterrorism 2019: 2–4; Center For Preventive Action 2023). Once again, considering perhaps the most important factor that is the increased deadliness of attacks by the Islamic State after the event, it would be difficult to talk about success under such circumstances, at least for short-term objectives. Additionally, it is challenging to predict the direction in which the Islamic State would continue would al-Baghdadi survive, but this study serves as an evidence that his death had put the group into a motion once again. But at the same time, it became increasingly difficult for any new leaders to maintain a public image and appear to their followers for they know that they will need to keep a low profile which ultimately undermines their authority.

Based on the second case study from this analysis it can be stated with confidence that the targeted killing of the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, in 2011 significantly contributed to decreasing the operational capability of the terrorist organization. Six months after his death, the group had caused undeniably less damage. This was demonstrated primarily by the number of casualties from terrorist attacks, which decreased by more than 40%, meaning that the attacks of the group became significantly less deadly than before. There was no observable change in the pattern of attacks on soft targets, but the number of hard targets increased after the operation, coinciding with al-Qaeda's reorientation to local conflicts and insurgencies. The death of Bin Laden also caused the group to use explosives slightly less in their attacks, as well as firearms, confirming the decrease of operational capability in terms of resources. However, the increase of suicide bombing caused by the leadership decapitation was apparent once again, indicating that the attractiveness of the ideology and the will to die as a shaheed did not disappear with Bin Laden. This serves as further validation for the assertion that there may be potential for retaliation and radicalization following a targeted killing.

Nevertheless, based on the previously set criteria, targeted killing of Osama Bin Laden can be evaluated as successful. Although the overall counterterrorism campaign by the United States against al-Qaeda produced significant pressure on the group, there is a reason to believe that the change of leadership forced by the operation had the biggest impact on the future of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, set the group on a path that ultimately resulted in its loss of the title of the world's number one terrorist group. Al-Qaeda's factions will likely continue in the already initiated decentralization from their core,

which means that the group will represent even less of an organization (Lister 2017: 23). The disintegration of al-Qaeda was further accelerated once al-Zawahiri met the same fate as Bin Laden when he was killed in Afghanistan by a drone strike after more than ten years in the group's leadership (The White House 2022). Not only the strike exposed Taliban from harboring the terrorist leader, it also implied that the US targeted killing campaign against top terrorist leaders continues, a fact that does not seem to be changing any time soon.

This study proved that targeted killing is a risky counterterrorism method and its effects are to a high degree uncertain. It should not be deployed alone but rather substituted with other measures and operations. Both case studies highlight the crucial role that the complexity of counterterrorism operations plays in the effectiveness of leadership decapitation. Without these operations, a single decapitation would likely result in unsatisfactory outcomes. In general, findings from this analysis are aligned with Fisher – Becker (2023: 14–17), who concluded that it would be inaccurate to assume that targeted killing deters fatalities caused by terrorists as there is enough evidence to suggest that killing prominent terrorist leaders may actually escalate violence. There is also an agreement with Regan (2022), according to whom, targeted killing of leaders of organizations without a rigid hierarchical structure has only a minimal impact on their survival. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that even a single leadership decapitation can to a certain degree decrease the operational capability of a terrorist group, but repeated leadership decapitation combined with other military operations can create significantly higher pressure and yield more successful results. Thus, targeted killing remains a controversial but relevant counterterrorism tactic, although the expectations of its achievements should be rather humble.

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