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**Death as a Strategic Tool:  
Analyzing the Effectiveness of Targeted Killings in the  
War in Afghanistan**

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## **1 Introduction**

The War in Afghanistan, led by the United States (U.S.) in response to the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, exists within the modern discourse of strategic studies for a number of reasons. The prolonged conflict lasted over two decades, was overseen by four U.S. Presidents, and spanned multiple generations of U.S. military servicemembers. However, the War in Afghanistan also stands out as the conflict where the U.S. government fully embraced targeted killing through the use of covert action and drones in order to fight a prolonged counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, respectively. The U.S. embraced this tactic after seeing it employed extensively by Israeli forces, specifically Mossad, during the Second Intifada and into the modern day. The slowly progressive efforts by the Israeli government to incorporate unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, into the targeted killing process drastically changed modern views on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. Despite the political polarization of these tactics, from the very beginning of the War in Afghanistan the U.S. government incorporated the lessons learned in the field into their own strategic plans.

### **1.1 Defining Terminology**

The term targeted killing is contested within the academic field but generally refers to “the premeditated, preemptive, and intentional killing of an individual or individuals known or believed to represent a present and/or future threat to the safety and security of a state through affiliation with terrorist groups or individuals” (Hunter, 2009: 1). For the purposes of this research, this is the definition that will be used as the benchmark to evaluate the occurrence of a potential targeted killing in the War in Afghanistan. In terms of a legal standing, this definition heavily relies upon the concept of preemptive self-defense to justify targeted killings as a state policy.

Of note, targeted killings are a phenomenon distinct from assassinations, due to the intended goal of each practice. While targeted killings are driven by the idea of preemptive self-defense, assassinations are killings conducted “for purely political or ideological reasons” (Hunter, 2009: 5). While the distinction appears small on its face, it separates the two actions into being legally defensible, in the case of targeted killing, or plainly illegal, in the case of assassinations. However, there are those like Schweiger (2019: 276-277) who question the veracity of separating the term targeted killing from that of “colonial aerial bombings...

assassination...[or] extra-judicial execution.” The argument against this distinction between terms being the that the origins and motivations of the practices are incredibly similar in practice and the semantics of different terminology only serve to insulate targeted killing from criticism (Schweiger, 2019).

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

This dissertation will examine the efficacy of using targeted killing during counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. More specifically, the research will focus on the War in Afghanistan due to the scope of the conflict, which encompasses both counterterror and counterinsurgency efforts, and the long lasting effects that the conflict continues to have on the international strategic realm. Additionally, focusing on the War in Afghanistan affords the study to employ quantitative analysis of targeted killing operations due to the availability of data from the conflict. While the practice of targeted killing operations opens up state governments to severe legal and moral scrutiny, the analysis in the research paper will be focus on whether or not the act is even effective. The research question that will guide the paper will be as follows: Was the U.S. targeted killing program an effective method to achieve their strategic goals during the War in Afghanistan?

In terms of methodology, this research will take a mixed-methods approach to analyze targeted killings conducted during the War in Afghanistan. Data about U.S. targeted killing operations in Afghanistan will be compared against data of insurgent and terrorist attacks during the same time period using a correlation analysis. Using this approach, the relationship, or lack thereof, between targeted killings and the rate of terrorist or insurgent attacks will be identified. For the purposes of this quantitative analysis, the success of the targeted killing will be measured based on the resulting rate of attacks that occur after the operation. While not perfect, this metric does reflect the U.S. government’s strategic goals for the War in Afghanistan which will be outlined in detail later in this paper. Additionally, this research will also examine case studies of key targeted killings executed throughout the War in Afghanistan. This approach will allow for a more in-depth investigation of targeted killings within the tactical and strategic context of the event.

## **1.3 Outline of Dissertation**

In order to research this topic, this paper will begin by examining the modern academic literature regarding the use of targeted killing and its role in counterinsurgency and

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counterterrorism operations. The literature review will be followed by a brief overview of the War in Afghanistan, with a focus on U.S. forces. This will provide a much needed historical context for the research and analysis, while also identifying key groups, players, and events during the war. Then, pulling from key concepts from the literature review, a theoretical framework will be identified which will guide the study and help elucidate the practice of targeted killings within the War in Afghanistan. This will be followed by a detailed explanation of the research design used to conduct a quantitative analysis of the effectiveness of targeted killings in the War in Afghanistan. More specifically, the process of forming a correlation analysis of U.S. led targeted killings and insurgent activity will be explained.

After firmly establishing the methodology of the research, it will then be employed to analyze the efficacy of targeted killings throughout the War in Afghanistan, from 2015 to 2020, based off of the strategic goals of U.S. forces. This data-driven investigation will identify and examine trends related to the relationship between U.S. led targeted killings and actions by the Taliban. From this research, a detailed look at the success and failures of targeted killing operations will be evaluated against the desired strategic goals of the U.S. government during the conflict.

This will be followed by an examination of specific case studies of targeted killings where key Taliban leaders were killed by the actions of U.S. forces. These case studies will offer a detailed inspection of the strategic state of the conflict both before and following the targeted killing. Finally, the dissertation will end with an examination of the implications of the continued use of targeted killings, offer specific policy recommendations to avoid the same mistakes in future conflicts, and then conclude with a summary of the main findings of the research.

### **1.4 Research Limitations**

This dissertation will not examine the questions of legality that haunt the practice of targeting and killing an individual when they reside in another country and, arguably, do not pose an immediate threat to the state conducting the targeted killing operation. Additionally, this study will not address the ethical implications and debates that, justifiably, surround targeted killing operations. While both are important facets of the practice, these aspects of targeted killing operations are already well researched within the academic literature. Moreover, there is a distinct lack of quantitative analysis of this phenomenon outside of research into Israel's

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approaches to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. Finally, due to the inherent secretive nature of covert action and drone strikes, this research will be limited in terms of detailed sources about targeted killing operations. Data will be pulled from information collated by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the group Drone Wars, while details about individual case studies will be pulled from press releases and media sources.

## **2 Literature Review**

The academic discussion about the policy of targeted killings is ongoing and, understandably, contentious due to the nature of the practice. In addition to debates about the appropriate definition, there are also arguments regarding the legality, morality, and efficacy of targeted killing operations conducted by states. While not exhaustive, this section will cover some of the major perspectives on targeted killing operations and highlight key concepts that will inform the methodology of this research. Due to the question of efficacy at the heart of this dissertation, the focus will be on discourse that is quantitative in its analysis. This distinction is key, as the bulk of research on targeted killings is qualitative in their methodology and focuses on the legal, moral, and political ramifications of the practice. The major exception to this approach is that of Israel's counterterrorism efforts against terrorist organizations associated with Palestine. Additionally, this section will also cover a brief history of targeted killings.

### **2.1 Israel and Targeted Assassinations**

Bergman (2018) provides a thorough accounting of Israel's history in the fields of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations*. Due to Israel's prominence in the field of targeted killings, a thorough understanding of their history is needed to adequately digest the academic discourse on the subject. Approaching the topic from the country's inception, the author highlights Israel's tactical advances and failures in the employment of targeted assassinations operations (Bergman, 2018). At the forefront of these efforts is Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence arm which is also responsible for covert action, and the Shin Bet, the country's intelligence arm focused internally and on counterterrorism operations (Bergman, 2018: 41). Israeli operations to specifically target and then kill individuals began in the early 1950's, with a focus on former Nazi war criminals who escaped justice after World War II (Bergman, 2018).

The goal of these initial targeted killings is up for debate. Retribution for the horrors of the Holocaust was undeniably a factor but Israel also brought high-profile individuals to trial. The major success in this effort came in 1960, when Mossad found and captured the high-ranking Nazi Adolf Eichmann who was living in Buenos Aires, Argentina under a new identity (Bergman, 2018: 65-67). While a targeted killing operation was considered in this case, Israel's Prime minister opted to capture Eichmann and then hold a trial for him in Israel (Bergman, 2018: 66-67). In the end, Mossad was successful in the mission and the trial resulted in Eichmann's

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execution by hanging (Bergmann, 2018: 67). While not an overt targeted assassination, this operation served to advance Israel's political objectives at the time, establish the effectiveness of Mossad, and set the precedence for covert action being acceptable in foreign countries to accomplish strategic goals.

However, Israel's strategic priorities drastically changed in 1962 when Egypt, under the leadership of President Nasser, unveiled newly devised surface-to-surface missiles that were capable of striking any location in Israel (Bergman, 2018: 68). Moreover, it was found out that some of the key minds behind the new Egyptian missiles were former Nazi and German scientists (Bergman, 2018: 69). This stood as a major intelligence failure for Mossad and necessitated drastic immediate action and a change in long-term strategic thinking. Mossad worked to identify the critical vulnerability for the new missile systems, which proved to be the German scientists who were still working on issues with the missile guidance systems (Bergman, 2018: 71). This began a long effort to neutralize or dissuade the scientists from continuing their work on the missile systems and saw Israel employ targeted killings in foreign countries, kidnapping, interrogation, and written threats (Bergman, 2018: 72-88). In the end, they were successful in ending the work on the Egyptian missile systems. The key takeaway from dealing with this existential threat, as Bergman (2018: 88-89) relays, is that "Mossad believed that, without the threat of violence directed at them, the German scientists would not have been willing to accept the money and give up on the project."

Another major time period covered by Bergman (2018), and heavily analyzed within the wider academic literature, was Israel's counterterrorism efforts in the Second Intifada. In early 2000, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was ongoing and contentious between the Israeli Prime minister Ehud Barak and the Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat (Bergman, 2018: 444). The Middle East Peace Summit at Camp David in July 2000, mediated by the U.S. President Bill Clinton, was the last overt attempt to reach a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine (Bergman, 2018: 444-445). However, the two leaders were unable to reach an agreement due to a number of lingering issues, one of which was the status of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (Bergman, 2018: 445). This issue acted as the flashpoint for the Second Intifada when the Israeli opposition leader and future Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, led a political rally at the Temple Mount following the peace summit (Bergman, 2018: 445-446). This led to



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Palestinian protests and Israeli police action, which spiraled into a cycle of escalation that resulted in increasing deaths on both sides (Bergman, 2018).

In less than a year, the Second Intifada escalated to the point where suicide bombings, conducted by Hamas, were the main fixture of the conflict (Bergman, 2018). The tactic of employing a suicide bomber proved to be highly effective, despite Israel's superiority in terms of technology and professional forces. Israel, using its domestic intelligence arm the Shin Bet, then adopted a policy of targeting and killing terrorists that were identified as posing an immediate threat to Israeli citizens. These targeted killings used both low-signature, such as poison and car bombs, and high-signature methods, such as missile strikes from helicopters (Bergman, 2018: 453). Nonetheless, these efforts proved ineffective in the struggle to reduce and prevent suicide bombings by Hamas.

At the end of 2001, Israel changed their approach to effectively attrit Hamas into submission. Israel's next approach in the Second Intifada was to reduce the reserve manpower within Hamas by targeted killing against the middle and upper leadership. More specifically, the goal was to "[take] out 20 to 25 of the organization [to] lead to its collapse" (Bergman, 2018: 457). In theory, this approach would also serve to reduce the overall age and level of experience within Hamas, as young terrorists took the place of mid-level leaders there were killed by the Shin Bet (Bergman, 2018: 457). This campaign required targeted killings on a scale much grander and more overt than in the past, to the point where the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was tied into planning and operations with the Shin Bet (Bergman, 2018). As a result, the rate of targeted killings drastically increased from "twenty-four people in 2000, eighty-four in 2001, one hundred one in 2002, and one hundred thirty-five in 2003" (Bergman, 2018: 461).

In early 2003, Israel acknowledged that their targeted killing campaign was still not an effective solution to end the suicide bombing by Hamas. Up until this point Israel had been reluctant to target terrorist leaders who also maintained a political presence, due to fears about international backlash. In Operation Picking Anemones, the codename of the new approach to the targeted killing of Hamas, the goal of the Shin Bet was to specifically target key leaders in Hamas to disrupt their leadership and ultimately neutralize the entity (Bergman, 2018: 493). Additionally, it established that the perceived safety of being a public political leader for the Palestinian cause was no longer valid. While the specific effects of this strategy on the leadership of Hamas are debated, which will be addressed later, the overall result was an

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eventual end to the Second Intifada. Operation Picking Anemones arguably culminated in the spring of 2004 with two critical targeted killings. The first was in March 2004 when Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the leader of Hamas, was killed by an Israeli helicopter gunship (Bergman, 2018: 505). Yassin's replacement, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, was killed a month later by the same method (Bergman, 2018: 507). These two targeted killings proved to be major blows to the leadership of Hamas and was immediately followed by a drastic reduction in suicide terrorism, despite the overall conflict still continuing for another year. The ramifications of these attacks and the importance of their targets will be covered later.

Bergman (2018) concludes his analysis of the conflict by highlighting how it was ultimately a success for Israel. The author states the following on the success of the targeted assassination campaign to stem the flow of suicide bombings during the Second Intifada:

Thanks to its streamlined targeted killing apparatus, the Israeli intelligence community triumphed over something that for many years had been considered unbeatable: suicide terrorism. By investing the resources of an entire country, through dogged persistence and cooperation between the intelligence and operational arms, and under the decisive leadership...Israel proved that a murderous and seemingly uncompromising terror network can be brought to its knees. The use of targeted killings, however, had heavy concomitant costs. The price was paid, first and foremost, by the innocent Palestinians who became the "coincidental damage" of the assassinations. Many innocent people were killed, and thousands, including many children, were wounded and left disabled for life. Others were mentally scarred or homeless. (Bergman, 2018: 513)

While not overtly in support of Israel's targeted assassination program, Bergman (2018) highlights a lot of supporting evidence in favor of the practice. However, he also alludes to the major pitfalls of the practice by acknowledging the collateral damage that occurred with more overt targeted killings such as missile strikes. The occurrence of collateral damage and other negative factors create the negative backlash effect on the state, which then detracts from the overall counterterrorism mission. The lessons learned from Israel's history in the arena of targeted killing are crucial, as they heavily inform the policy decisions and strategies that the U.S. would later adopt in the War in Afghanistan and the data from these conflicts is used continually in academic discourse for the purpose of analysis.

### 2.2 Terror Stock Model

To identify the failures of state sanctioned targeted killing operations, Kaplan et al. (2005) present a "terror stock model" to specifically analyze the correlation between the rate of

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suicide bombings executed by a terrorist organization and targeted killings by a state engaged in counterterrorism operations. The model is premised on the idea that, due to that nature of suicide terrorism requiring the expenditure of a life, a terrorist organization's capabilities and destructive power are heavily reliant on the number of terrorists available (Kaplan et al., 2005: 228-232). Therefore, the two factors that heavily affect an organization's terror stock are its current level of manpower and its rate of recruitment for new members of the terrorist organization (Kaplan et al., 2005: 228). This second aspect, recruitment, is critical to understanding the impacts of targeted killing operations against a terrorist organization beyond the short-term effects. Of note, the theoretical framework for this approach is reminiscent of Israel's second strategy during the Second Intifada, when they intended to use targeted killing to attrit Hamas leadership into submission (Bergman, 2018: 457).

Kaplan et al. (2005: 234) use this model to examine Israel's targeted killing operations from January 2001 until October 2003 against Hamas and other terrorist organizations. The authors then assume, given the parameters of the model, that Israel's ultimate goal is to simply reduce the terror stock in order to effectively reduce the number of attacks against the state (Kaplan et al., 2005). However, after applying this model to the given timeframe, the effects that targeted killings had on recruitment began to outweigh the effects of the direct results of the targeted killing operation. The authors concluded that "although [targeted killings] might remove an immediate terrorist threat, the present analysis suggests that such actions actually increase the terror stock via hit-dependent recruitment" (Kaplan et al., 2005: 232).

Moreover, the authors also introduce another option to reduce the terror stock of a terrorist organization: preventative arrests (Kaplan et al., 2005). Using this tactic to preemptively combat terrorist organizations, Kaplan et al. (2005) argue that a state gains the benefit of reducing the available stock of terrorists but without triggering a reactionary recruitment increase. Moreover, preventative arrests also afford the state an opportunity to obtain potentially valuable intelligence from the individual, rather than letting the information be lost in a targeted killing (Kaplan et al., 2005: 232). This introduces a criticism of targeted killings that is seen throughout the academic literature on counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations. By neutralizing a member of a terrorist organization or insurgency group, the state is permanently preventing themselves from using that individual as an intelligence asset in their efforts. Overall, this model brings into question the overall effectiveness of targeted killings.

### 2.3 Deterrence, Backlash, Disruption, and Incapacitation

Hafez and Hatfield (2006) evaluate data from the Second Intifada to test four hypotheses regarding the effect of targeted killings on a terrorist organization. The first hypothesized effect is that of deterrence, where individuals are driven to stop or reduce the intensity of their tactics due to the high cost of being targeted and killed by a state (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 363-364). The second posited effect is backlash, which supposes that “preexisting and mobilized organizations facing extreme coercion will fight back with greater levels of violence” (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 364). This is a proposed effect that heavily ties into the terror stock model presented by Kaplan et al. (2005), as the recruitment for terrorist organizations immediately following a targeted killing operation is linked to public backlash. The third hypothesized effect is disruption, where targeted killings detract from an organization’s ability to effectively plan, mobilize, and act due to the constraints and pressures of the counterterrorism efforts (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 365). The authors note that this effect can also be achieved by other means, such as preventative arrests or curfews (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 365). Finally, the authors also propose that targeted killings serve to incapacitate terrorist organizations by depriving them of their “organizational infrastructure for violence” (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 365). While similar to the idea of disruption, this concept is distinguished by bifurcating the counterterrorism approach into targeted killings that affect the leadership and organization of a group with military and law enforcement operations that target the production of terrorist materiel (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 366).

In terms of methodology, the authors use a difference and time-lagged series of events to conduct a regression analysis in order to validate or refute each hypothesis (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 366). This regression analysis includes the 151 targeted killings conducted by Israel from November 2000 to June 2004 during the Second Intifada, along with rates of Palestinian and Israeli violence outside of targeted killings (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 366-367). The authors also acknowledge the difficulties in assembling their data and inconsistencies between Israeli and Palestinian sources (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 367). This is a factor that most studies on the conflict suffer from due to the generally secretive nature of targeted killings and conflicts in reporting on deaths during the conflict. However, the results of the regression analysis found that none of the hypothesized effects were especially evident in the dataset used (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 377-378). Hafez and Hatfield (2006) conclude that, in the case of the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict, that targeted killings did not positively or negatively affect overall counterterrorism operations. Moreover, the authors suggest that the eventual reduction in suicide bombings during this timeframe is due to an increase in physical security measures by Israel, which disrupted the planning and conduct of more suicide bombings as time progressed (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006: 378). Overall, this study leaves more questions than answers as to the effectiveness of targeted killings, yet it plainly refutes other the assertions by Kaplan et al. (2006) that targeted killings result in increased suicide bombings and an overall escalation in the conflict.

#### **2.4 Shot-Noise Model**

Adding to the academic discourse, Kaplan et al. (2006) present another model to analyze targeted killings and explore the idea of their model being predictive in order to help prevent suicide bombings. In this model, the authors examine the correlation between the rate of suicide bomb attacks in Israel and the counterterrorism efforts executed by the IDF and the Shin Bet from 2001 to 2003 (Kaplan et al., 2006: 554). The data analyzed is specific, with only confirmed suicide bombings that occurred within Israel being examined in relation to two counterterrorism actions by Israel: targeted killings and preventative arrests of suspected or known terrorists (Kaplan et al., 2006: 554). The authors then “[adopt] a flexible shot-noise specification...to estimate both the instantaneous and lagged effects of tactics on suicide-bombing attempts” (Kaplan et al., 2006: 555).

In their statistical analysis, Kaplan et al. (2006: 556) decisively state that there is no average or consistent rate of suicide bombings based on the dataset analyzed. This leads them to focus on their shot-noise model in order to explain the changes in the rate of suicide bombings. Based on their model, the authors conclude that both targeted killings and preventative arrests are predictive of resulting rate of suicide terrorism (Kaplan et al., 2006: 557). However, the analysis indicated that targeted killings actually increased the amount of suicide bombings within the dataset, while large-scale preventative arrests, such as the mass arrests during Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, were responsible for a decrease in suicide bombings (Kaplan et al., 2006: 557). While this is a succinct conclusion for the study, the authors do note some limitations that affect their observations. Most notably is the timeframe of the dataset used by the authors, which concludes in the summer of 2003 (Kaplan et al., 2006: 560). Yet, as explored

by other authors, this coincides with the beginning of Israel's targeted killing campaign focusing on key leaders, rather than just identified terrorist operatives (Kaplan et al., 2006: 560).

### **2.5 Game Theory**

Jacobson and Kaplan (2007) analyze the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by applying game theory. This approach attempts to answer "whether [targeted killings] can be an optimal counter terror measure when evaluated in terms of saving total (Palestinian and Israeli) civilian lives, even when hits provide downstream benefits to terrorists because of recruitment" (Jacobson and Kaplan, 2007: 773). The authors model the potential action or inaction by a single terrorist organization and the Israeli government by utilizing a two-period progressive game, where each period is comprised of two stages and the terrorists always start a given period (Jacobson and Kaplan, 2007: 774-775). In this game, the terrorists must decide how many suicide bombings will be attempted in the period, while the government must decide on the number of targeted killings it will conduct (Jacobson and Kaplan, 2007: 775). A targeted killing could potentially prevent a potential suicide bombing but will also result in an increase in terrorist recruitment efforts in the next period (Jacobson and Kaplan, 2007: 776). While simplistic, this game theory model highlights the importance of patience needed by the state or counterterrorism organization when reacting to suicide bombings or trying to prevent them outright.

The results of this game theory model found that, in contradiction to prior studies, if employed correctly targeted killings could result in decreased levels of violence over time. More specifically, the study found that:

If the government values the future more than the terrorists, one can expect low-level (and perhaps chaotic) cycles of violence whereby the attack and hit rates fluctuate over time, whereas if the terrorists value the future more highly, the level of violence is higher but the pattern of violence is more regular. (Jacobson and Kaplan, 2007: 789)

This highlights the importance of intent from a counterterrorism perspective, as reactionary targeted killings can just lead to an escalation of overall violence. Jacobson and Kaplan (2007: 789) also note that a targeted killing can "still be optimal" in saving or preserving the greatest number of lives, even with the know increase in recruitment that targeted killings induce. This conclusion opposes previously asserted positions that targeted killings are purely detrimental or ineffective at combating suicide terrorism.

### **2.6 Leadership Decapitation**

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A key concept in the study of targeted killings, which has been previously alluded to, is leadership decapitation. The approach of leadership decapitation is a distinct subset of targeted killing as it is “designed to kill or capture the key leader or leaders of a terrorist group,” rather than simply kill an operator within the terrorist group (Price, 2012: 9). In theory, this approach to counterterrorism operations limits the terrorist organization’s ability to effectively plan and lead subordinate cells due to the loss of a key leader, forces the organization to focus on security, adopt a slower operational tempo, and it dissuades other terrorists from seeking out a leadership position (Price, 2012: 9-10).

In Falk’s (2015) analysis of targeted killings through the lens of leadership decapitation, the author focuses specifically on counterterrorism efforts and suicide bombings in the geographic area of Gaza from 2000 to 2010. The author notes that Israel conducted over 160 targeted killings between 2001 to 2005 and that this preceded the U.S. adoption of the tactic, which saw extensive use in Afghanistan and Pakistan from 2006 to 2012 (Falk, 2015: 2). Due to Gaza’s unique location that prevented other security measures from being effective, the author argues that targeted killings were the only variable directly affecting Gaza when the rate of suicide bombing decreased (Falk, 2015).

Falk (2015: 8) pulls data from various Israeli, Palestinian, and international news sources to build a picture of targeted killings and the number of deaths associated with suicide bombings. An empirical model is then presented to analyze the “latent individual trend (slope)” of the deaths caused by a suicide bombing, to act as a metric of effectiveness, after a targeted killing (Falk, 2015: 9-11). Based off of this model, Falk (2015: 13) claims that a conclusive view on the relationship between the deaths from suicide bombings and targeted killings cannot be made. The author then conducts the same analysis for specific targeted killings of significant operational and political leaders and finds that they had a positive effect lowering the number of dead from subsequent suicide bombings, with only one outlier (Falk, 2015: 13-15). The effect of the targeted killings of the Hamas leader and his replacement, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Azziz al-Rantissi, were the most pronounced in the dataset due to the subsequent reduction in Israeli deaths from terrorist attacks (Falk, 2015: 18). This analysis gives credence to the efficacy of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism tactic.

By comparison, Kirchofer (2016) concentrates their analysis on Israel’s counterterrorism efforts against Hamas from 1996 until 2014. The author takes the ideas presented by Falk (2015)

a step further and argues that Israel's targeted killing of senior leaders in 2003 not only deterred future attacks but also compelled Hamas to accede to Israel's will (Kirchofer, 2016: 16). Pulling from the hypothesized effects of targeted killings, such as those presented by Hafez and Hatfield (2006), Kirchofer (2016: 22) presents the concept of compellence, which is "the threat or use of force to convince an opponent to change behavior or a status quo the compeller dislikes." This opens up the possible strategic goals that a state could achieve when deliberately employing targeted killings against key leaders, as deterrence and disruption operations are designed to maintain the status quo or operational tempo (Kirchofer, 2016: 22). While their conclusions differ slightly, both Falk (2015) and Kirchofer (2016) found targeted killing to be an effective method to combat terrorism, especially when employed against key leaders.

However, Yaoren (2019) asserts that leadership decapitation is not the ultimate solution for counterterrorism operations. This author looks at specific cases of leadership decapitation, such as those of Yassin and Rantissi during the Second Intifada (Yaoren, 2019: 9). However, Yaoren (2019: 9-10) differs from previous authors by highlighting how these targeted killings did not end to conflict yet succeeded in lowering its intensity and rates of attacks by Hamas. These concerns about overvaluing the effect of leadership decapitation are valid and highlight the importance of determining a desired effect or strategic goal when employing targeted killings.

## **2.7 Legal Perspectives**

Currently, the academic literature about targeted killings is suffused with discourse about the legality of the practice and its ethical repercussions. Connolly (2017: 476-477) notes that the modern justifications of targeted killings by the U.S. and Israel, such as preventative self-defense, are just variations of old views that warfare is not beholden to international law. The pitfalls of this approach to counterterrorism, Connolly (2017) argues, is that it leads to an ever expanding view of what entails an appropriate measure of self-defense. Connolly (2017: 466) asserts that the U.S. government's growing use of targeted killings is an echo to Bismarck and Wilhelm era views that "military necessity overrules all law."

Meanwhile, Schweiger (2019) asserts that the term "targeted killing" is nothing more than a rebranding of assassination. Pulling from a number of United Nations Security Council and Human Rights Council debates, the author argues that despite the utility and history of the practice it is still viewed as illegal on its face by most states (Schweiger, 2019). Schweiger (2019) shows how modern targeted killings have a historical basis in "air policing" and "police



bombing” committed by previous colonial powers, which are condemned acts by today’s legal standards. The author concludes that the variation in language and terminology that led to the term “targeted killings” is only to obscure the purpose of maintaining this deadly approach to asymmetric conflicts as an option (Schweiger, 2019).

Kretzmer (2005) approaches the topic through the lens of established international human rights law and international humanitarian law and conducts case studies of U.S. and Israeli led targeted killings. Ultimately, Kretzmer (2005) concludes that it is dangerous for states to not follow established international law, even when engaging in counterterrorism operations, due to the potential perils it presents to innocent civilians. Moreover, the act of targeted killing is a circumvention of the due legal process and should only be used when there is an imminent threat to life (Kretzmer, 2005). Answering the question of the legality of targeted killing is important, as the issue of legitimacy is only compounded by the additional question of effectiveness.

### **2.8 Gaps in the Academic Literature**

As seen throughout the literature review, there are a few examinations of targeted killings which employ a quantitative methodology to analyze the practice. However, most of this research is focused primarily on Israel with regards to the Second Intifada or its ongoing counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations against Palestinian groups. While this discourse is fruitful, much of the analysis does carry a hint of unacknowledged bias due to the polarization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **3 The War in Afghanistan**

In order to properly evaluate the use of targeted killing operations in the War in Afghanistan, it is imperative that the nature of the conflict, the key leaders, and states are first understood. Most importantly, an understanding of the strategic goals of the U.S. during the war is absolutely essential to make a determination about the effectiveness of the targeted killing program. While this is a multi-faceted conflict that lasted over two decades, its precursors can be traced back to the 1980's and the Cold War (Katzman and Thomas, 2017).

#### **3.1 The Soviet-Afghan War and The Taliban**

The roots of the U.S. led War in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 began with the Soviet-Afghan War during the 1980's (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). After invading the country in 1979, the Soviet Union occupied the country for ten years in order to back the pro-Soviet government (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). This pro-Soviet government was set in-place following the Soviet operation to prevent the spread of anti-communist influence, which also resulted in the assassination of the previous Afghan government leader. However, the Soviet occupation was opposed by Afghan resistance groups known as the Mujahideen. With the support of U.S. being made available to the Mujahideen through Pakistan, the resistance fighters conducted a prolonged insurgency campaign against Soviet forces in what essentially amounted to a proxy war during the Cold War (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). The cost of this conflict was immense and is viewed as one of the main reasons for the Soviet Union's economic collapse. This eventually resulted the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989, which left a power vacuum in Afghanistan's government (Katzman and Thomas, 2017).

This led to a civil war within Afghanistan, as multiple groups from within the Mujahideen sought to gain power. One of these groups was the Taliban, which was led by Mullah Muhammad Omar (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). This group was primarily comprised of religious students of Omar who maintained a strict view Islamic law and believed that its application would lead to stability within the country. The Taliban would emerge as the victor of Afghanistan's internal conflict and even captured Kabul in 1996. An important consequence for this regime change is the Taliban's support for Islamic extremist groups.

#### **3.2 Al-Qaeda and 11 September 2001**

The leadership of the Taliban enabled Afghanistan to become a safe haven for Al-Qaeda to both train and plan future terrorist attacks (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The now infamous Al-

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Qaeda is an international terrorist organization that was founded by Osama Bin Laden (Laub and Maizland, 2022). This organization planted itself in Afghanistan after the Taliban's ascension and fostered a mutually beneficial relationship for both organizations. While the Taliban allowed the creation and running of training camps and operational bases in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda in turn provided financial resources and access to their international terrorist network (Laub and Maizland, 2022).

The major plot planned and conducted by Al-Qaeda was the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on 11 September 2001. These attacks entailed in the hijacking of commercial aircraft by members of Al-Qaeda, who then used the hijacked aircraft to commit suicide terrorism on a massive scale (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Al-Qaeda hijacked four aircraft in this attack: two of which struck the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center in New York City, one which crashed into the Pentagon in Northern Virginia, and the last which crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after being thwarted by its passengers (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Overall, the attacks on 11 September 2001 resulted in roughly 3,000 deaths (Laub and Maizland, 2022). This event directly led to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, as the attacks had been planned and coordinated by Al-Qaeda from the safe haven of Afghanistan.

### **3.3 Operation Enduring Freedom**

The U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom on 7 October 2001, with the support of multiple North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, which effectively began what is now viewed as the War in Afghanistan (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The operation had three major goals. First, to destroy Al-Qaeda's ability to conduct imminent terrorist operations and dismantle their terrorist network in the country (Department of State, 2009). Second, to remove the Taliban from power within Afghanistan due to their support of Al-Qaeda (Department of State, 2009). Third, to prevent future terrorist organizations from using Afghanistan as a safe haven by building up the state government (Department of State, 2009).

The initial stage of Operation Enduring Freedom was rapidly successful due to overt air strikes from coalition forces (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Notably, the U.S. also employed covert action through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Special Operations forces to conduct shaping operations and targeted killings before conventional forces were employed (Jacobsen, 2020). The result of the push from U.S. and NATO forces, along with additional Afghan allies who engaged in most of the ground combat, was the overthrow of the Taliban government (Laub

and Maizland, 2022). Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda's operations were disrupted and members of the terrorist organization retreated first to Tora Bora and then to Pakistan (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The repercussions of failing to kill or capture al-Qaeda at this point, especially Osama Bin-Laden, would be felt throughout the war.

By the end of 2001, the Taliban regime had completely collapsed and an interim government was formed under the leadership of Hamid Karzai, with the goal of eventually forming a new government (Laub and Maizland, 2022). This change in Afghanistan's government was codified by the United Nations (UN) through the Bonn Agreement, which was signed on 5 December 2001, which was then backed by UN Security Council Resolution 1383 (Laub and Maizland, 2022). A few weeks later, the UN also agreed to the UN Security Council Resolution 1386, which officially created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to aid in the stabilization of Afghanistan and support efforts to build infrastructure and democratic institutions (Laub and Maizland, 2022). These supporting actions by the international community caused in a brief period of optimism for Afghanistan, resulting in efforts to promote human rights, improve the country's education system, and rebuild much needed infrastructure. However, the overall situation in Afghanistan remained volatile due to weak government institutions, corruption, limited financial resources, and limited state capacity to perform its core functions of governance.

### **3.4 Taliban Insurgency**

In March of 2002, the U.S. led Operation Anaconda in the Shah-i-Kot Valley of Afghanistan with the goal of eliminating the Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the area (Laub and Maizland, 2022). It is estimated that around eight hundred fighters occupied the valley, near the border with Pakistan (Laub and Maizland, 2022). However, this operation also coincided with a shift in the U.S. government's focus towards Iraq (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Exploiting the situation, the Taliban began an insurgency against the U.S., ISAF, and Afghan government forces. With the support of elements from Pakistan, the Taliban maintained a robust insurgency effort by employing guerrilla tactics, suicide bombings, and targeted killings to undermine stability in the country. Additionally, the Taliban took advantage of the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan and established a network of safe houses and weapons caches (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The porous nature of the border also allowed for freedom of movement for the Taliban and their supporters.

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This overall strategic situation is what drastically extended the duration of the War in Afghanistan. Even when ISAF helped develop the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the struggle to maintain security and stability in the country proved to be a tremendous task. ISAF led counterinsurgency efforts, such as the targeted killings of Taliban members and Al-Qaeda, led to backlash when collateral damage occurred (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The Taliban then exploited the situation to foster grievances amongst the Afghan population and expand upon tribal divisions, all while painting themselves as defenders against an invading foreign force. Gradually, they were able to organize and regain control over certain regions of the country. These gains for the Taliban were exacerbated by Afghanistan's weak government during its interim phase, rampant corruption amongst officials and the military, and overall inability to ensure security for its citizens (Laub and Maizland, 2022). For its part, the ANSF proved to be ineffective at tackling these issues and maintaining control of the country. These issues were exacerbated by dwindling international attention for the war, as the U.S. began the Iraq War as part of its larger War on Terror. This resulted in reduced financial support and momentum in the war, leading it to stagnate despite its fast opening stages.

### **3.5 A New Approach**

In 2009, the U.S. adopted a different approach to the War in Afghanistan under the leadership of the newly elected President Barack Obama (Laub and Maizland, 2022). During that year, U.S. troops were surged by 17,000 in February and then 30,000 in December. This brought the total of U.S. troops in Afghanistan to an estimated 98,000 personnel (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Coupled with these reinforcements, President Obama's administration also prioritized the role that Pakistan plays in Afghanistan gaining stability. In an Interagency Policy Group's white paper on the recommended new approach to Afghanistan, the new strategy was summarized as "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan" (Department of Defense, 2009). The same white paper also outlined the importance making the Afghan government and the ANSF self-sufficient through international aid and mentorship (Department of Defense, 2009). These new efforts, especially the troop surge starting in late 2009, yielded some tactical level successes but failed to achieve a decisive victory over the Taliban or significantly alter the balance of power in Afghanistan (Laub and Maizland, 2022).

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In May of 2011, Operation Neptune Spear is launched to execute one the most significant targeted killing operations in the war, with the target be Osama Bin-Laden (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The operation is planned and led by the CIA but executed by forces from Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in Pakistan. This is a major victory for the U.S. as Osama Bin-Laden was the “primary target” throughout the war, due to his role in planning the terrorist attacks that occurred on 11 September 2001 (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The next month, as the war was close to reaching a decade in length, President Obama announced the troop withdrawals would begin within the next year, with a planned complete withdrawal in 2014 (Laub and Maizland, 2022). However, the War in Afghanistan would continue, with ebbs and flows in intensity, for years more due to failures to achieve victory over the Taliban and repeatedly failed negotiations between the U.S. government, the Afghan government, and the Taliban. Throughout this time, the U.S. military and coalition forces conducted a large number of targeted killings by air strike through manned aircraft and drones (Frantzman, 2021). The international perception of the conflict was arguably shaped most by the use of these drones, which made the war less costly in terms of manpower but allowed for a swelling in targeted killing operations due to their ease of use and tactical utility (Frantzman, 2021).

### **3.6 U.S. Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover**

In February 2020, the negotiation led by Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation, with the Taliban finally make meaningful progress with the signing of the Doha Agreement (Laub and Maizland, 2022). This agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban outlined a framework for a negotiated settlement between the two entities and specified a timeline for the withdrawal of international forces (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Additionally, the agreement required the Taliban to sever ties with terrorist organizations and subsequently engage in peace talks with the Afghan government.

In accordance with the Doha Agreement, the U.S. began a phased withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan with a planned full departure for no later than 11 September 2021 (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The withdrawal called for a gradual reduction in U.S. forces along with the progressive turnover in security responsibilities to the Afghan government and its forces. However, after all U.S. forces departed early in August 2021, the Taliban exploited the chaotic security situation and launched a major offensive to regain control of the country (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The government, military, and police institutions that had been built up over

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the past 20 years collapsed, and by September 2021 the Taliban was once again in control of the country (Laub and Maizland, 2022).

The War in Afghanistan had multiple long-term consequences for the country itself and the international community. In addition to the thousands of lives lost, both military and civilian, the conflict displaced millions of Afghans, both internally and as refugees, and caused extensive damage to infrastructure and the economy. Additionally, due to the Taliban's rule, the country remains politically unstable and there are international concerns over human rights violations. Moreover, there was no conclusive end to the terrorism concerns that initially sparked the conflict. Overall, the War in Afghanistan has become a symbol of the perils associated with counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, as well as post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

## **4 Theoretical Framework**

Understanding the effects targeted killings in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns, particularly in the War in Afghanistan, is the crux of the research in this dissertation. In that effort, an established theoretical framework is necessary in order to gain insight into the effectiveness, unintended consequences, and overall impact that targeted killings had on the War in Afghanistan. Moreover, this framework needs to be flexible enough to stand up to quantitative and qualitative analysis. The concepts that compromise the theoretical framework for this dissertation are the theories of deterrence, backlash, disruption, compellence, and leadership decapitation. By incorporating these theories about the direct effect of targeted killings into the analysis, the research of this dissertation will provide insight into the complexities of modern counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies and inform future policy considerations regarding conflict resolution, particularly those involving terrorist organizations and insurgencies. Additionally, the distinction between tactical and strategic goals will be of the utmost importance when determining the effectiveness of targeted killings.

### **4.1 Deterrence**

The theory of deterrence proposes that targeted killings can dissuade adversaries from engaging in or continuing violent activities (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006). Therefore, in the analysis of the War in Afghanistan, it will be assessed if targeted killings have been effective in lowering the levels of insurgent violence, reducing the frequency or intensity of attacks, or reduced the operational capabilities of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. For the purposes of the analysis, a targeted killing will be observed as having a deterrent effect if there is a decrease in the rate of violent activity following the targeted killing (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006). The concept of deterrence is also intrinsically tied to the theory of leadership decapitation, as the successful targeting and killing of one key leader in an insurgent or terrorist organization can deter their replacement and followers from perpetrating future attacks or acts of violence.

### **4.2 Backlash**

The theory of backlash differs from others in the framework, as it predicts that targeted killings generate potentially negative consequences (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006). Within the context of Afghanistan, this entails increased radicalization of the local population, increased recruitment for insurgent and terrorist elements, and amplified public support for insurgent groups due to their opposition the government that executed the targeted killing. The analysis



will evaluate whether targeted killings in the War in Afghanistan have inadvertently led to a backlash effect for U.S. and coalition forces. The determination of whether targeted killings have fueled the grievances and propagated terrorist and insurgent activity will be made based on the rate of retaliatory attacks (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006). Generally, backlash also includes the broader societal impacts, changes in public perceptions, and media coverage that are negative towards the presence of foreign forces or the government. However, due to the limitations of this study, these aspects will not be evaluated in the same depth.

### **4.3 Disruption**

The theory of disruption refers to how targeted killings can interrupt and interfere with the command and control structures, communication channels, and operational readiness of insurgent or terrorist organizations (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006). In terms of assessing the occurrence of disruption in the analysis, the result is fairly similar to the effects of deterrence. However, disruption also includes the creation of internal disarray, infighting, or fragmentation of insurgent and terrorist organizations (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006). Additionally, this theory could result in decreased recruitment and training of new organization members or a complete change in tactical posture, such as adopting a defensive strategy.

### **4.4 Compellence**

Compellence is a relatively new theory that entails the use of force or coercion to force adversaries to change their behavior or policies (Kirchofer, 2016). With respect to targeted killings, this theory implies that eliminating personnel in an insurgent or terrorist organization can pressure the leadership to seek negotiations, abandon violent tactics, or comply with certain political demands (Kirchofer, 2016). The analysis of the War in Afghanistan will evaluate if targeted killings had a correlation with the Taliban engaging in peace talks or modifying the overall strategies of Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. Additionally, broader political changes after targeted killing will also be assessed, such as interactions between insurgent groups and the Afghan government or efforts to reconcile political differences through power-sharing agreements.

### **4.5 Leadership Decapitation**

Leadership decapitation differs from the other theories, as it is based on a different strategic approach to targeted killings (Kirchofer, 2016). This theory focuses on the removal of top leaders from insurgent and terrorist organizations, as well as the resulting impact on the

organization in relation to their operations and capabilities (Kirchofer , 2016). The analysis of leadership decapitation will explore whether the elimination of top Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders succeeded in disrupting the hierarchical structures of insurgent or terrorist organizations, leading to internal disarray and diminished tempo with regards to strategic decision-making. It will also be examined if new leaders emerged to fill the void and, if so, what overall effect this had on the operations of the organization.

#### **4.6 Tactical vs. Strategic Goals**

Understanding the difference between tactical and strategic goals is critical to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of targeted killings. This means differentiating between different levels of success on the battlefield and with regards to the broader context of conflict resolution and national security. Tactical goals, with regards to targeted killings, refer to the short-term and immediate results of an individual operation (Harvey, 2021). This level of objectives is primarily focused on neutralizing or incapacitating specific targets due to the inherent value or role they have within an organization (Harvey, 2021). This includes explosive specialists, small unit leaders, or facilitators in a given region. Conversely, strategic goals encompass the more broad and long-term objectives of a conflict. These go beyond individual operations or battles and are established in order to further to the overall success of the counterinsurgency or counterterrorism campaign (Harvey, 2021). Acknowledging the difference between these two sets of goals is vital for military strategists and decision makers, as it directly affects how targeted killings are employed. Put simply, while tactical successes may yield short-term gains, their overall impact on the conflict can be limited in scope or significance if not aligned with broader strategic objectives of the conflict (Harvey, 2021).

## **5 Methodology**

When developing the methodology for this research the existing studies of targeted killings were taken into account, as well as the desired end state of being able to evaluate their effectiveness in a specific conflict. The review of current academic literature about targeted killings uncovered that the bulk of research has been into the moral and legal aspects of the practice. Additionally, in the cases where a quantitative analysis method is adopted, much of the discourse is also focused on prior conflicts involving Israel. This leaves a noticeable gap in terms of analysis of U.S. led targeted killing operations, which is to the detriment of the overall literature due to the country's prominent role in international affairs. This led the dissertation to adopt a methodology that both had a quantitative aspect of analysis and focused on modern U.S. conflicts. The resulting goal of this research, therefore, is to address whether the U.S. targeted killing program was an effective method to achieve their strategic goals during the War in Afghanistan.

### **5.1 Research Design**

This study uses a mixed-methods research design by combining a quantitative correlation analysis and qualitative case studies. By employing this mixed-methods approach, the analysis will be afforded a more comprehensive view of targeted killings in the War in Afghanistan. More specifically, the statistical relationships of the targeted killings within the dataset will be properly examined while key targeted killings, in alignment with the theory of leadership decapitation, will be examined in-depth based on their context within the overall conflict.

For the quantitative aspect of the analysis, a correlation analysis will be used to explore the relationship, or lack thereof, between key variables that are associated with insurgent and terrorist violence and targeted killing operations in the War in Afghanistan. This statistical analysis technique will help with identifying patterns, associations, and casual relationships between the variables in the dataset (Kader and Franklin, 2008). By utilizing a correlation analysis in this way, this dissertation can make a more grounded assessment regarding the effectiveness of targeted killings within the War in Afghanistan.

The qualitative aspect of the analysis will be comprised of case studies that focus on key leaders who were subject to a targeted killing operations in the War in Afghanistan. This method of analysis will allow for more detailed insight and understanding of the effects of targeted killings, within the context of the political and military landscape at the time. Through detailed

examination of the targeted killing of key Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders, this research will dissect the impacts of targeted killings beyond the metrics of violence used in the quantitative analysis.

The research in this dissertation will be more robust and offer a refined perspective on targeted killings by maintaining a mixed-methods approach to analysis. Integrating the quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. While the quantitative portion provides an overview of targeted killings through the conflict, the qualitative section allows for more in-depth analysis on individual targeted killing operations. By design, this method of analysis therefore mimics the same two approaches to targeted killing operations: analyze a vast amount of data at once or focus on key iterations. Additionally, this mixed-methods approach will be adaptive and allow for flexibility in gathering and analyzing data. Finally, this research design allows for a more holistic view on the effects of targeted killings in the War in Afghanistan by enabling a nuanced exploration of both macro-level patterns and micro-level dynamics.

## **5.2 Data Collection**

Due to the nature of this research, obtaining the data for a quantitative analysis proved to be a challenge. The data collected for this study is primarily from reputable news sources that maintain statistical databases on U.S. military actions and terrorist activity. This information is free to access from the website of each individual organization listed in the bibliography. Additionally, data was also read from published academic studies. Access to any government databases for information pertaining to the research was not possible or the available data was of little value. Of note, the availability of concise and specific data is a main limiting factor in the research. There are also inherent limitations with the data collected for this study which will be addressed in turn.

The data regarding U.S. targeted killing operations in Afghanistan, referred to as U.S. air or drone strikes by the source, is from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's comprehensive database on Drone Warfare in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). The Bureau of Investigative Journalism is an independent and respected organization that is known for its in-depth reporting on stories relating to armed conflicts and international issues. Moreover, the dataset provided by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism maintains a high degree of credibility and scope of information on targeted killings by compiling news sources to support each data entry (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). This makes for a meticulously researched database that is also transparent in its sources and readily available for public access.

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The dataset used for this research into U.S. strikes in Afghanistan covers from 2015 to 2020 (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). This timeframe covers a large time period in the later part of the war when the Taliban maintained a strong insurgency against U.S. forces and the Afghan government, while also capturing phases of diplomatic attempts to reach a settlement (Laub and Maizland, 2022). The database has detailed information of U.S. strikes during this time period, including the following: date, location, province, death toll estimates, and acknowledgement if it was confirmed by the U.S. government (Purkiss and Serle, 2017).

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism also maintains a database of U.S. strikes in Pakistan from 2004 to 2018 (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). However, due to limitations in the database, this data is not able to be used for analysis. The database is missing key information that would identify what or who was the target of the U.S. strike. Due to this crucial missing piece of information for each strike, the information from this database will not be included in the analysis. As a result, the data considered in the analysis will be limited to targeted killings executed in Afghanistan. This negatively affects the study as the nature of the conflict led to both Afghanistan and Pakistan both having areas where operations occurred, due to the nature of the border between both countries. However, this has been controlled by only using data from Afghanistan for both targeted killings and terrorist attacks, so as to not skew the data.

Information about attacks carried out by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is sourced from the Global Terrorism Database which is maintained and updated by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland. The Global Terrorism Database is a well-known and authoritative resource that provides a wide spectrum of information about terrorist attacks throughout the world, going all the way back to the 1970's (START, 2022). For the purposes of this research, the information used from the database will be limited to attacks conducted by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2020. This corresponds with the timeframe and location of the dataset used to represent targeted killings, with the same restriction of not including data tied to Pakistan. The data from the Global Terrorism Database contains thorough information about each attack, including the following: date, location, the identified organization that conducted the attack, type of attack, and the number of casualties caused (START, 2022). Thus, this dataset will enable a full examination of terrorist and insurgent activities during the War in Afghanistan.

### **5.3 Correlation Analysis**

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In terms of the quantitative analysis, this research will investigate the correlation, or lack thereof, between the rate of Taliban attacks and the rate of U.S. strikes carried out in response. This will be accomplished by conducting a correlation analysis of the two variables, targeted killings and Taliban attacks, in order to better understand the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables. This process entails first preparing the data into a format that is compatible for analysis. To this end, the data for both variables are compiled based on month for the years ranging from 2015 to 2020. The analysis will be conducted on the statistical software suite SPSS Statistics, provided by the University of Glasgow.

When assessing the correlation between two variables, the Pearson correlation coefficient must first be calculated. The Pearson correlation coefficient, also referred to as Pearson's  $r$ , is a numerical value that ranges between negative one and positive one, which indicates the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables (Kader and Franklin, 2008). If the correlation coefficient is close to positive one, then there is a strong positive correlation between the variables (Kader and Franklin, 2008). This means that the variables may tend to increase or decrease in synchronization. If the correlation coefficient is close to negative one, then there is a strong negative correlation between the two variables (Kader and Franklin, 2008). This means that the variables behave opposed to one another, with regards to increasing or decreasing. If the correlation coefficient is close to zero, then it suggests that there is a weak relationship between the variables.

The correlation coefficient will then be tested to determine its statistical significance using a standard  $t$ -test. This test will assess whether the observed correlation is statistically significant or just a result of random chance (Kim, 2019). Once this is assessed, then the relationship between attacks by the Taliban and U.S. strikes can be interpreted. If a significant correlation exists, then it would imply that the rate of Taliban attacks in Afghanistan are tied to the frequency of U.S. strikes. Additionally, in order to help visualize the datasets and their relations to one another, multiple graphs will be generated from SPSS. This will include a scatter plot and a simple line graph over time that aids in seeing the relationship between the two variables.

An important note about this type of analysis is that signs of correlation between the variables do not also indicate causation (Kader and Franklin, 2008). There is always the possibility that other factors outside of the data being analyzed are influencing the events in the

dataset. To the extent possible, this has been mitigated by selecting a wide date range to get a larger strategic view on the data. Ideally, this correlation analysis will provide valuable insight into the relationship between targeted killings and Taliban attacks in Afghanistan.

#### **5.4 Case Studies**

Examining select case studies is a key piece of this research as it affords an opportunity to investigate key targeted killings of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda that occurred during the War in Afghanistan. While a correlation analysis provides a valuable quantitative assessment of the impact of targeted killings at the macro level, it fails to capture the complexities and multifaceted reactions that occur after a successful targeted killing operation. Additionally, a quantitative approach does not incorporate the unique contextual circumstances that influence conflict's power dynamics, especially with regards to an insurgent or terrorist organization. The use of case studies allows for a nuanced exploration of the direct effects of a target killing on a terrorist or insurgent organization, the leadership challenges that follow it, and the longer term consequences. This qualitative approach to analysis also provides much needed context to the qualitative findings within the scope of the political and religious aspects of the War in Afghanistan. By studying individual cases in detail, this research will gain insight into the roles of key leaders being targeted and killed that is not possible through a strict statistical analysis.

The cases selected for this analysis will deliberately be key figures and leaders in either the Taliban or Al-Qaeda during the War in Afghanistan. This requires that the individual killed in the case have either a leadership position within the covert arm, a political role, a religious role, or a combination of all three within the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. This approach to data selection does not include lower level leaders from either organization, as the quantitative aspect of the analysis will cover this aspect. Moreover, conducting a detailed case study of targeted killings of low level leaders is difficult due to a lack of sources about their role in the organization. Put simply, if an insurgent or terrorist has accrued enough data about their impact to their respective organization, then they are likely already in a key leadership role. However, the main benefit of this approach is that it allows the research to validate or refute the concept of leadership decapitation as a strategic approach when employing targeted killings.

The cases will also be selected to represent both positive and negative outcomes of targeted killing operations, from the perspective of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, and the subsequent response of the insurgent or terrorist groups. By including a diverse range of

outcomes in the case studies, the research can help identify aspects that contribute to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of targeted killings as a counterinsurgency or counterterrorism measure.

The information for the case studies will be collected from a variety of sources, to include official U.S. government documents, public media coverage, books, and published academic studies on the case. This data will entail the nature and method of the targeted killing operation, the role and importance of the target individual, the immediate aftermath of the operation, and any long-term effects that resulted from the operation. This information will then be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and interpret commonalities or patterns across multiple cases. By employing this qualitative analysis method, the case studies will offer insight into the less tangible effects of targeted killings, beyond just a change in the frequency of insurgent or terrorist activity.

The examination of case studies also directly complements the correlation analysis of targeted killings and attacks by insurgents or terrorists. While a correlation analysis helps identify the statistical relationship between targeted killing and attacks, case studies allow for insight into the mechanisms and dynamics behind the statistical relationships. If the quantitative analysis uncovers that a positive correlation exists between targeted killing operations and attacks by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, then the case studies can help elucidate the circumstances that might make targeted killings escalate violence or provoke retaliation. Conversely, if it is found that there no significant correlation, then the case studies can potentially offer an explanation of instances where targeted killings had a limited impact on insurgent or terrorist activities. By using this mixed-methods approach to analysis, the research can take an inclusive and robust approach to tackling the research question.

### **5.5 Ethical Considerations**

Due to the nature of the research and the data sources used, there are no significant ethical considerations for the chosen methodology. The data used in the analysis is from sources open to the public, published academic studies, books, and official government documents. None of the sources involved the interview or testimony of real-life subjects. Additionally, all of the sources of data are known to be unclassified at the time of this research.

### **5.6 Limitations**



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While the goal of this research is to provide insight into the phenomenon of targeted killing operations in the War in Afghanistan, there are a number of research limitations that need to be highlighted. First, is the issue of data availability. Particularly with regards to the quantitative analysis aspect of this research, access to detailed information about targeted killing operations is, understandably, limited. While there are reliable databases of targeted killings that occurred by an U.S. military airstrike or drone, there is no such repository for ground-based raids or capture kill missions (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Additionally, with regards to insurgent or terrorist organizations, there are few recorded metrics regarding their activities outside of reported attacks or overt acts of violence. This means that instead of factoring in recruitment rates as a known quantity in the correlation analysis, the research will be limited to the rate of attacks as a measurement of violence. Moreover, the lack of publicly accessible data on specific targeted killing operations may limit the depth of the qualitative analysis in select cases.

The second limitation for this research is the granularity of the available data. The reporting and recording of both targeted killings and insurgent attacks requires a large amount of subordinate information in order to be useful for analysis. This includes facets such as the location, date, or responsible organization for any event. One such issue that this research suffers from is the lack of target and attributional information for U.S. strikes in the country of Pakistan (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). Due to this lack of detailed information about these strikes, the country of Pakistan has been removed from the quantitative analysis portion of this research in order to not skew the dataset.

The third limitation of this research is with regards to generalizability. The findings and conclusions of this research are specific to the context of the War in Afghanistan and may not apply to other conflicts or regions. This is due to the distinct geopolitical, cultural, religious, and historical context of the country. While inviting, extending conclusions from the Israeli context to the War in Afghanistan, or vice versa, is a generalization that does not properly provide beneficial insight into either conflict. To address this concern, the context of the War in Afghanistan will be sustained throughout the research and analysis. With these limitations acknowledged, this dissertation aims to gain a better understating of the effects and impact that targeted killings had on the insurgent and terrorist groups in the War in Afghanistan.

## **6 Quantitative Analysis**

Between January 2015 and March 2020, the U.S. conducted 278 separate strikes against the Taliban, just within Afghanistan (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). Within the same time period, the U.S. military conducted only nine confirmed strikes against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). The disparity is arguably due to Al-Qaeda famously decamping the country at the onset of the war, in search of a more permissible environment without U.S. military interference (Laub and Maizland, 2022). In stark contrast, from January 2015 and March 2020, the Taliban conducted 6,084 attacks (START, 2022). While many of these attacks targeted U.S. military personnel and installations, the bulk of these attacks were against extensions of the Afghan government or newly established ANSF units or buildings (START, 2022).

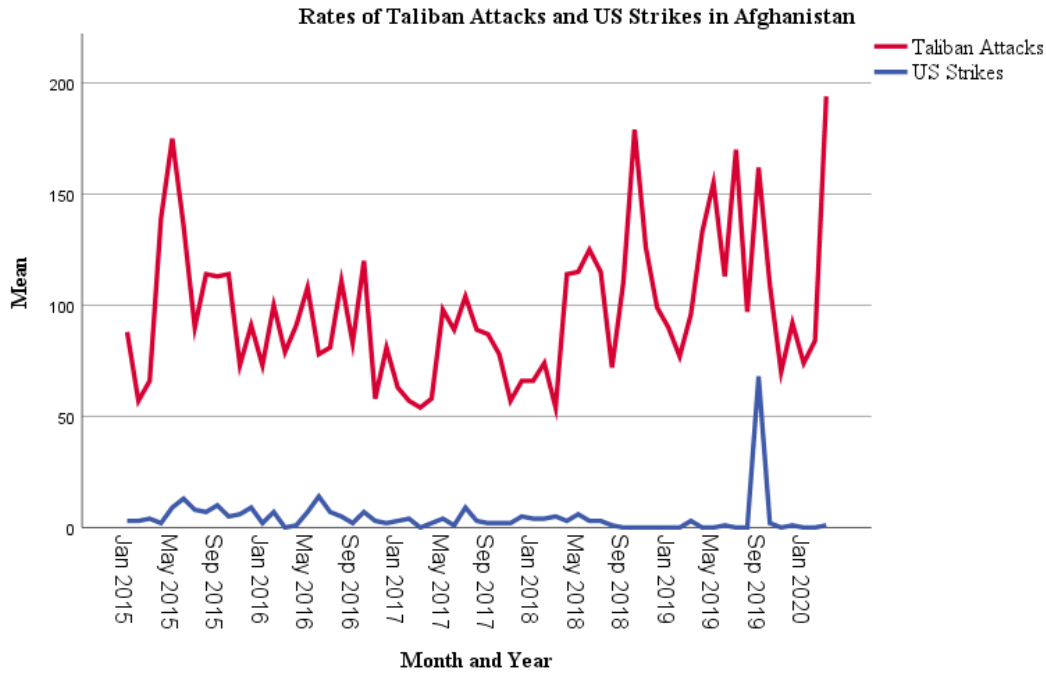
### **6.1 Data Processing**

This section will analyze if there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of violence perpetuated by the Taliban and the U.S. led targeted killing program in the War in Afghanistan. For this analysis, the level of Taliban violence is represented by the sum of all the different types of violent actions such as bombings, kidnappings, raids, or ambushes conducted by the Taliban against the Afghan government or U.S. forces in a given month (START, 2022). Additionally, the targeted killing program is represented by the sum of all the U.S. air and drone strikes conducted against confirmed members of the Taliban in a given month (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). These variables were chosen because, based on the data available on the topic, they were the best metrics to measure the overall effectiveness of targeted killings within the War in Afghanistan. As addressed in the methodology section, other metrics of targeted killings, such as capture or kill raids, and Taliban activity, such as recruitment levels or social influence, were not available for this analysis. To address this question at the heart of the research, a correlation analysis will examine the nature and strength of the relationship between the two variables.

The dataset for these two variables has a wide coverage for the War in Afghanistan. The data reflects both variables by month from January 2015 until March 2020 (Purkiss and Serle, 2017 and START, 2022). Additionally, it reflects all of the properly recorded Taliban attacks and U.S. strikes throughout the entire country. Both variables in the dataset are measured on a scale that will allow for a correlation analysis, since they are both numerical values representing the

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sum of occurrences for each variable per month (Kader and Franklin, 2005). This information is graphically represented in Figure 1.



*Figure 1*

Before conducting the correlation analysis, it is imperative to prepare the data by correcting any missing values or outliers. This dataset did have one significant outlier, as seen in Figure 1. In September of 2019, the U.S. military had a notably higher number of confirmed strikes with sixty eight (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). This contrasts heavily with the month that has the second most strikes, which is fourteen in June 2016 (Purkiss and Serle, 2017). To compensate for this outlier and not skew the analysis, the value of this variable was trimmed to align with the next highest value, in this case fourteen. The correlation analysis was also conducted without adjustment and did not produce a notably different mean for U.S. strikes or resulting correlation coefficient, therefore the trimming was sustained to make the visualization of the data easier to interpret.

The descriptive statistics, shown in Table 1 below, will help gain an understanding of the overall dataset. Of note, the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for each variable are presented. After looking at the descriptive statistics, there are no unusual patterns or characteristics in the dataset.



**Correlations**

		Taliban Attacks	US Strikes
Taliban Attacks	Pearson Correlation	1	0.121
	Significance (2-Tailed)		0.347
	Sample Size (N)	63	63
US Strikes	Pearson Correlation	0.121	1
	Significance (2-Tailed)	0.347	
	Sample Size (N)	63	63

*Table 2: Calculated Correlations Between Taliban Attacks and US Strikes*

Now that the correlation coefficient has been calculated, the magnitude and direction of the can be interpreted. The value of a correlation coefficient is always between positive one and negative one (Kader and Franklin, 2005). A value of positive one signifies a direct positive correlation between the two variables, while a value negative one indicates the variables behave in opposition to one another. If the value is exactly zero, then there is no correlation between the two variables. Additionally, the larger the absolute value of the correlation coefficient, then that indicates that the relationship between the variables is stronger (Kader and Franklin, 2005). The resulting Pearson’s correlation coefficient is 0.121. This means that the rate of attacks by the Taliban and the U.S. led strikes have a slight positive relationship to one another. However, due to its low absolute value, the correlation coefficient indicates that there is likely no linear correlation between the two variables (Kader and Franklin, 2005).

**6.3 Visualization**

To help visualize the correlation analysis, a scatter plot is presented in Figure 2 below to represent the relationship between the two variables in the analysis. The horizontal axis represents the rate of Taliban attacks, while the vertical axis represents the frequency of U.S. strikes. As shown in the scatter plot, there is a cluster around the x-axis and only a select few data points that have both a high X and Y value. Additionally, a linear fit was modelled and illustrates a slightly positive slope, which aligns with the correlation analysis. However, there is a large disparity between the pairs of points that have a high value of Taliban attacks and US strikes. When the range of 160-200 Taliban attacks per month is examined, their corresponding

value of US strikes ranges from as low as zero to as high as fourteen. This disparity is reflected in the low  $R^2$  value shown at the top of Figure 2, which indicates a poor fit of the data.

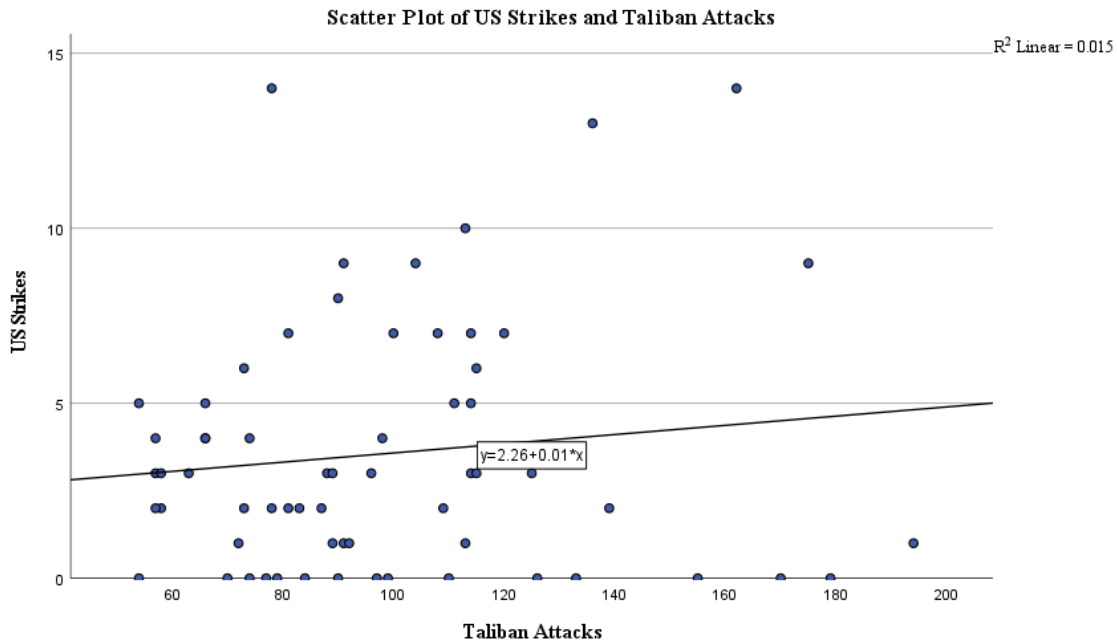


Figure 2

### 6.4 Significance Testing

Finally, to determine if the observed correlation is statistically significant, an independent samples  $t$ -test was conducted on the correlation coefficient in SPSS. Effectively, this test assesses how significant the variations are between variable groups (Kim, 2019). The null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) for this test is that the correlation coefficient from the  $t$ -test ( $\rho$ ) is equal to zero and there is no significant correlation between the two variables. The alternative hypothesis ( $H_a$ ) is that  $\rho$  is not equal to zero and there is a significant correlation between the variables. Due to this correlation analysis being a two-tailed test, the level of significance, or alpha level ( $\alpha$ ), is 0.05 (Kim, 2019). The results of the independent sample  $t$ -test can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, denoted below.

#### Group Statistics

	US Strikes	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Taliban	1	6	108.50	43.867	17.909
Attacks	2	9	85.00	25.549	8.516

*Table 3: Statistics by Variable*

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-Test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						One-Tailed <i>p</i>	Two-Tailed <i>p</i>			Lower	Upper
Taliban Attacks	Equal Variances Assumed	1.059	0.322	1.320	13	0.105	0.210	23.500	17.809	-14.975	61.975
	Equal Variances not Assumed			1.185	7.284	0.137	0.273	23.500	19.830	-23.023	70.023

*Table 4: Results of the Independent Sample t-Test*

To interpret the results, the Levene’s test must first be considered. The significance value from this test (*p*) of 0.322 is compared to the established  $\alpha$  value of 0.05 and is found to be greater (Kim, 2019). This means that the variances are not significantly different, and the top row of Figure 7 can be interpreted. Next, the significance value (*p*) for the two-tailed test can be evaluated. This *p* value is 0.21, which is also bigger than the established  $\alpha$  value. To summarize the key results of the independent *t*-test:  $t(13)=1.32$ ,  $p=0.21$ , and  $p > 0.05$  (Kim, 2019).

These results indicate that there is not a statistically significant difference in the rate of attacks and acts of violence perpetrated by the Taliban and the rate of strikes conducted by the U.S. government (Kim, 2019). The implication of these results is that, within the timeframe of 2015 to 2020 from the dataset, the strikes executed by the U.S. military against the Taliban, specifically in Afghanistan, did not correspond with the insurgent organization’s frequency of committing violent acts. While this quantitative analysis is admittedly done on a macro level due to the nature of the data, the results only add fuel to the question of whether targeted killings are an effective method of conducting counterinsurgent or counterterrorism operations. By the metrics chosen for this correlation analysis, it is clear that targeted killings do not result in a statistically significant change in the rate of Taliban attacks in Afghanistan when viewed on a monthly basis from 2015 to 2020.

## **7 Qualitative Analysis**

To offer a more detailed view on the effects of targeted killings, this research will examine key cases of targeted killings conducted by the U.S. government during the War in Afghanistan. As alluded to in the methodology section, these case studies will be focused on key leaders of the Taliban or Al-Qaeda who were targeted due to their military or leadership role within their respective organization. By concentrating on the analysis of these specific individuals, this research can gain insight into the impact of the targeted killing operation on the individual's organization and the broader dynamics of the War in Afghanistan.

Each case study will examine the historical background of the targeted individual, their role within the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, the method of the operation, the short-term effects immediately following the act, and the long-term impacts of the targeted killing operation. The subjects of the case studies will be Osama Bin Laden, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, and five leaders from the Islamic State in Khorasan.

### **7.1 Case Study: Osama Bin Laden**

Osama Bin Laden is arguably one of the most notorious and influential terrorist leaders in modern times who both founded and acted as leader for Al-Qaeda. His extremist ideology grew out of his fervent belief in Islam, his experiences fighting with the Mujahidin against the Soviet Union in the 1980's, and his learned contempt of Western states, particularly the U.S., due to their interference in the Middle East (Gunaratna, 2011: 2). He resolved to create an international terrorist organization, called Al-Qaeda, to combat these evil Western elements on their own soil by employing terrorist attacks. To this end, from 1991 to 1996 he created training camps for Al-Qaeda fighters and operatives in Sudan; followed by similar facilities in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 (Gunaratna, 2011: 2). Despite opposing the overall influence of the West, Bin Laden's vitriol was especially targeted at the U.S. due to their direct support of Muslim regimes (Gunaratna, 2011: 2).

The most infamous terrorist acts coordinated by Osama Bin Laden were the multiple attacks against the U.S. on 11 September 2001, which were summarized in the historical overview (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Bin Laden quickly became one of the top prioritized targets for the U.S. government, with his potential kill or capture being a stated goal during the initial invasion of Afghanistan. However, he continued to evade U.S. forces for almost a full decade by maintaining the upmost secrecy, changing his location, and exploiting the harsh terrain



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in Afghanistan and Pakistan. During this time, Bin Laden maintained very close control over Al-Qaeda's planning and execution of global terrorist acts (Annamalai, 2011). His past crimes and his ongoing involvement in international terrorism made him a high-value target for the U.S. government in War in Afghanistan and the larger War on Terror.

On 2 May 2011, a team of U.S. Special Operations Forces conducted a raid on a compound in Pakistan where, according to intelligence estimates from the CIA, Osama Bin Laden was hiding with his family. Under the orders of President Obama, the goal of the operation was to either capture or kill the leader of Al-Qaeda. Ultimately, the raid resulted in the death of Osama Bin Laden, as he was shot multiple times by Special Operations Forces as they searched and cleared the compound. The body was taken with the team as they extracted, while Bin Laden's remains were disposed of at sea in order to prevent a traditional burial site.

The death of Osama Bin Laden had an immediate impact throughout the global terrorism network that he helped cultivate, particularly due to the nature of his demise by a targeted killing operation. After Al-Qaeda confirmed the news of his death, "there were retaliatory attacks in Pakistan, threats of further attacks, outpourings of support for Bin Laden as a martyr and eulogies filled with promise of continued efforts by extremists and sympathizers" (Gunaratna, 2011: 10). Condolences poured in from across the world, as terrorist and extremist groups lamented the loss of the Al-Qaeda leader. There were also massive calls for revenge against the U.S. government and its allies across the terrorist network. According to Gunaratna (2011: 11), there were eighty-seven terrorist attacks in Pakistan alone in the four months following Bin Laden's death. These attacks were focused on government, police, and military sites, which resulted in four hundred and fifty-one people being killed and six hundred and fifty-four being injured, (Gunaratna, 2011: 11). Moreover, members of Al-Qaeda vowed to strike back against the U.S. in retaliation and target major figures in the U.S., ranging from President Obama to the leaders of Lockheed Martin (Gunaratna, 2011: 11).

From the perspective of the U.S. and its allies, the targeted killing of Osama Bin Laden was a massive victory in the fight against terrorism, which dealt a "psychological blow" to the members of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations (Gunaratna, 2011: 10). The success of the operation was widely celebrated in particular in the U.S. but also other Western nations. The implication of the targeted killing, beyond the strategic value of decapitating the leadership of the Taliban, was the message that the West would not abide by terrorist organizations or allow

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them to escape accountability for their actions (Gunaratna, 2011). However, the targeted killing also had consequences for the U.S. government's relationship with Pakistan. The operation to kill Bin Laden was planned and conducted without the knowledge or consent of the Pakistani government, which led to tensions between the two nations (Haqqani, 2015). This raised questions about the legality of the operation, which was only compounded by the nature of the raid being a targeted killing. Even though the practice had become part of the established U.S. counterterrorism strategy, the lawfulness of clandestine forces going into a country, that the U.S. was not officially at war with, to kill a man was viewed as debatable, with regards to international law. Furthermore, some questioned the long-term impact of using targeted killings to combat terrorism, while also raising concerns about the unintended consequences that the practice could create, such as increased recruitment for terrorist organizations and radicalization.

With Osama Bin Laden's death, a number of internal divisions within Al-Qaeda's leadership arose, as the issue of succession became more apparent. The terrorist organization had been fairly centralized in terms of organization and leadership, before the death of its leader, and needed to find a replacement to fill the role. There was debate regarding which of two main candidates would be an ideal successor to lead Al-Qaeda: Saif al Adel and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Annamalai, 2011: 12). Saif ad Adel was an experienced combatant who had filled multiple roles in the past, including chief of security and one of the main architects of Al-Qaeda's media campaign (Annamalai, 2011: 12). However, Ayman al-Zawahiri was ultimately chosen for the leadership position due to his extensive experience as Bin Laden's deputy. Moreover, Zawahiri was a proven leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and aided in the planning of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 (Annamalai, 2011: 12). Zawahiri was officially made the leader of Al-Qaeda on 16 June 2011 (Annamalai, 2011: 12). While the death of Osama Bin Laden had disrupted the leadership of Al-Qaeda, ultimately it only took the terrorist organization six weeks to replace him (Annamalai, 2011). This resiliency would only inspire other terrorist organizations and result in the further decentralization of Al-Qaeda's terrorist network.

Overall, the targeted killing of Osama Bin Laden was a symbolic and tactical triumph for the U.S. and its larger counterterrorism efforts. It resulted in the death of a terrorist leader of the highest order, who had already conducted and coordinated a number of terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its citizens, while also disrupting the leadership structure of Al-Qaeda. Additionally, in the immediate aftermath of the operation, it led to a boost in morale and

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demonstrated the U.S. government's resolve in combating worldwide terrorism. However, the targeted killing was not a success with regards the U.S. government's strategic goals. Effectively, the killing of Bin Laden had only shuffled the leadership within al-Qaeda and forced them to adopt a more decentralized planning structure. Moreover, his death did not the end the global jihad movement started by Osama Bin Laden. As summarized in the months following Osama Bin Laden's death:

His death does not signify the end of the global jihad and now Ayman Al Zawahiri has taken his place and his leadership is believed to add a whole new dimension to Al-Qaeda. The real solution to defeating violent extremism is to counter and challenge the ideology of such individuals and organizations. (Annamalai ,2011: 13)

While the targeted killing of Bin Laden was a short-term success for the U.S. government, it failed to truly prove the long-term effectiveness of the practice due to the complexities of the worldwide terrorist organization and the evolving state of the conflict.

### **7.2 Case Study: Mullah Akhtar Mansour**

Mullah Akhtar Mansour was a key leader within the Taliban until he was killed in May 2016. His involvement with the Taliban movement went back to its early stages and he was viewed as a close friend of Mullah Omar, the founder and spiritual leader of the Taliban (Basit, 2015: 9). Mansour also previously held key roles in the Taliban going back to the 1990's, when the Taliban originally controlled the country of Afghanistan (Basit, 2015: 10). During that time, he served as both the Minister of Civil Aviation and Transportation. Throughout his time with the organization, he known as a charismatic diplomat who could skillfully navigate the many internal alliances and factions within the Taliban. These qualities contributed to his rise upper level leadership both before and during the War in Afghanistan. Mansour took on the position as the head of the Taliban in July 2015, after the death of Mullah Omar was confirmed (Basit, 2015: 10). While Mullah Omar had died in April 2013, this fact was insulated from the public and media by the Pakistani government (Basit, 2015).

On 21 May 2016, Mullah Aktar Mansour was targeted and killed by U.S. military forces in Afghanistan (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). His vehicle was hit by a U.S. drone strike while transiting through Balochistan, a province in Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). Unlike many past targeted killings conducted throughout the War in Afghanistan, this strike was conducted by the U.S. government without the consent of the Pakistani government. While this exemplifies the U.S. government's willingness to bend legality

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to accomplish a targeted killing of a key leaders, it also shows how the nature of Taliban operations does not adhere to traditional views about a contained battlespace within the War in Afghanistan.

The immediate impact of the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansour was a leadership vacuum within the Taliban (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). As the current head of the Taliban, he was responsible for maintain unity of effort and cohesion throughout the multifaceted organization. Moreover, he maintained a centralized control over the Taliban's operations before his death, as evidenced by the multiple efforts he orchestrated to seize and hold territory in Afghanistan (Basit, 2015). This was contrary to the military approach of his predecessor, who prioritized asymmetric warfare tactics. The abrupt loss of Mansour's leadership interrupted the Taliban's existing command structure and likely exacerbated internal power struggles.

In the aftermath of Mullah Akhtar Mansour's death, the Taliban did not publicly acknowledge the death of their leader for a number of days. This may have been due to their inability to immediately produce a successor, as they had done when news of Mullah Omar's death was made public. On 25 May 2016, Mansour's death was finally confirmed by the Taliban, along with an intent to seek revenge against the U.S. government (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). In this way, the targeted killing of Mansour became a shared grievance and mobilizing event for the Taliban. Members of the organization wished to prove their mettle against the foreign invaders and occupiers. As a result, the rate of attacks in Afghanistan by the Taliban increased. As shown by Wilson and Zenko (2017) in their assessment of the targeted killing's aftereffects, the rate attacks initiated by the Taliban that resulted in casualties increased by more than twenty percent in the six months following Mansour's death. The increased rate of violent activity against military and government by the Taliban proves that, despite the loss of a leader, their ability to coordinate and conduct operations remained intact.

The nature of the targeted killing of Mansour also had major implication for the U.S. government and their policies in the War in Afghanistan and the region as a whole. This targeted killing, which was authorized by President Obama, was overtly acknowledged by the CIA after it was conducted (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). Additionally, it was conducted in the Balochistan province of Pakistan, "where no known previous military or CIA strikes had occurred" due to political sensitivities with the government (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). The goal of the strike

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was aligned with the theory of leadership decapitation and the U.S. government's desire to achieve this effect superseded previous concerns about the Pakistani government.

The targeted killing also coincided with U.S. government's efforts to reach a diplomatic solution with the Taliban. Within the U.S. government at the time, there were debates about the unintended consequences that this operation could have. While some asserted that it would make the Taliban more amenable to negotiation, other guessed the opposite. The attack could inflame anti-American sentiments within the Taliban and undermine the process towards a peace settlement. Additionally, there were concerns that targeting key leaders could create a "martyrdom" narrative within the organization and result in increased recruitment rates for the Taliban (Wilson and Zenko, 2017).

When the long term effects of the targeted killing are evaluated, Mullah Akhtar Mansour's death led new leadership to ascend within the Taliban and confirmed the organization's resiliency. Mansour's former deputy, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, would eventually assume the leadership role left vacant, while other senior leaders took on greater responsibilities as well (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). In effect, the Taliban demonstrated their flexibility by making the leadership transition and continuing with their ongoing insurgent operations against the Afghan government and U.S. forces (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). Mansour's death had disrupted the organization strategic operations and tempo in the short term, but this was eventually overcome with effectively no loss to the organization overall capabilities. The nature and method of Taliban attacks that occurred before the targeted killing, would continue after.

The effectiveness of using a targeted killing operation against Mullah Akhtar Mansour is, upon evaluation in retrospect, questionable. At that stage of the conflict in 2016, the goal of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan was to enable the ANSF and the Afghan government to rebuild and stabilize the country (White House, 2015). Moreover, the U.S. forces had supposedly "ended [their] combat mission" in the War in Afghanistan but still maintained then strategic goal of ensuring the country "is not a safe haven for international terrorists" (White House, 2015: 9).

Ostensibly, the drone strike was a tactical success for the U.S. government. The strike both eliminated a high-value target and leader of a known insurgent group, while also disrupting the immediate operations of the Taliban by forcing changes in leadership roles. The targeted

killing also served as a demonstration of the U.S. government's hard power and the military's capability to executed precision strikes, regardless of location or terrain.

Conversely, when viewing the targeted killing with respect to the strategic goals at the time, the operation was ineffective in the longer term. While the death of Mansour was a blow to the Taliban's command structure and caused a temporary setback in operations, the organization quickly recovered. After a minor transitional period, he was ultimately replaced by Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada and then the acts of violence committed by the Taliban only increased in the months following the strike (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). Additionally, the targeted killing opened up the possibility for backlash from the local population by adding fuel to the argument against U.S. forces and their counterinsurgency and counterterrorism methods.

### **7.3 Case Study: Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim**

Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, also known as Abdul Rauf Aliza, was a well-established leader first in the Taliban and then the Islamic State before he was subject to targeted killing by the U.S. government (Johnson, 2016). His time with the Taliban began back in the 1990's, when the organization originally controlled the country (Johnson, 2016: 8). During this time, he was part of an elite unit that fought against opponents to the regime. Despite the proficiency of this unit, Khadim was captured in late 2001 and in early 2002 he was detained at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, an alleged black site for the U.S. government (Johnson, 2016: 8).

He was released by the U.S. government in December 2007, quickly rejoined the Taliban, and established himself in Helmand province in Afghanistan (Johnson, 2016: 9). Due to his extensive combat experience and renown as a former prisoner at Guantanamo Bay, Khadim was incorporated into the Taliban leadership for the region (Roggio, 2015a). However, Khadim's time as a detainee led him to identify with the radical form of Salafism. This view of Islam was not shared by most of his peers in the Taliban and tensions rose as he began converting his immediate subordinates (Johnson, 2016: 9). This theological impasse led Khadim to covertly separate himself from the Taliban's leadership and pledge allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014 (Johnson, 2016: 9). At this time, the Islamic State was gaining traction and global infamy by seizing territory in Iraq and imposing their Salafist ideology (Johnson et al., 2016). Khadim was then assigned the role as "deputy emir for the Khorasan province" for the Islamic State's Khorasan branch and helped establish the terrorist organization in Afghanistan (Roggio, 2015a).

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From 2014 to 2015, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim established himself as the leader of Islamic State forces in the Helmand region of Afghanistan (Johnston, 2016). On 9 February 2015, Khadim was killed by a U.S. drone strike while traveling by car in a Northern district of Helmand (Johnston, 2016: 9). In a single act, this targeted killing operation neutralized a former Taliban leader but also decapitated the head of the emerging Islamic State elements within Helmand province. The immediate impact of Khadim's death was a complete disruption of operations for the Islamic State forces formerly under his control. This was exacerbated by the Taliban, who exploited the lack of coherent leadership amongst Khadim's former subordinates and associates (Johnston, 2019: 10). Seizing the opportunity, the Taliban reasserted control of Helmand province and forced the remaining Islamic State fighters to flee into Northern Afghanistan and East to Pakistan (Johnston, 2019: 10).

The death of Khadim had significant implications for the Taliban, Islamic State, and U.S. forces in Afghanistan. The operational capabilities of the Islamic State were thoroughly diminished the Taliban's attacks against them, following Khadim's death. In the end, the Taliban were able to exert control over Helmand province, to the detriment of U.S. forces, ANSF, and the Afghan government (Johnston, 2019). This was due to the disruption in the Islamic State's operations and the loss of direction caused by the targeted killing that decapitated the leadership.

Overall, the targeted killing of Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim proved the difficulty of the U.S. government's mission in Afghanistan. While the operation resulted in the death of a former Taliban leader and current head of part of the Islamic State, both organizations that the U.S. government was opposed to, the fallout of the incident highlights the complex situation posed by the country's competing, sometimes opposed, insurgent and terrorist organizations. Arguably, the disruptive effect of the targeted killing served to benefit the Taliban more than U.S. forces, as they were able to wrest control of Helmand province from the Islamic State (Johnston, 2019). This case emphasizes the need to nest targeted killings within greater operations in order to make them effective at the strategic level.

### **7.4 Case Study: Leaders of the Islamic State in Khorasan**

As evidenced in the previous case study, the presence and activities of the Islamic State, specifically their Khorasan province branch, became a major factor in the power dynamics of Afghanistan in 2014 (Johnston, 2016). The aim of the terrorist organization is to establish a regional caliphate in Afghanistan, in support of the worldwide efforts being pushed by the

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Islamic State as a whole (Johnston, 2016). To that end, their strategy in Afghanistan was focused on recruiting individuals to their cause, often former disaffected members of the Taliban, and then the capture and hold of territory. This put the Islamic States at odds with the Taliban but also the elements of the Afghan government and U.S. forces in the country. In response to this emerging threat to their ongoing efforts in Afghanistan, the U.S. government initiated a targeted killing campaign to eliminate the top leader of the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State. However, this effort would lead to a pattern of repetition between the U.S. forces and the terrorist organization (Soufan Center, 2018). Rather than focus on a single targeted killing operation, this case study will examine the sequential targeted killing of five leaders from the Islamic State in Afghanistan: Hafiz Sayed Khan, Abdul Hasib, Abu Sayed, Qari Hekmatullah, and Abu Sayeed Orakzai (Soufan Center, 2018).

In July 2016, Hafiz Sayed Khan was targeted and killed by a U.S. drone strike while transiting in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. Khan was a former commander in the Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and worked his way up to become its top leader in the Khorasan region (Roggio, 2015b). At the time of his death, Hafiz Sayed Khan was the leader of all the Islamic State terrorists within Afghanistan and his death marked the first targeted killing of a high ranking leader from the terrorist organization (Soufan Center, 2018). While his death was a significant blow to the Islamic State's short-term efforts of expansion in the region, Khan was ultimately replaced.

In the aftermath of Khan's death, Sheikh Abdul Hasib assumed leadership of the Islamic State forces in Afghanistan. He became notorious when, in March 2017, he orchestrated a brutal attack on an Afghan military hospital in Kabul that resulted in "more than thirty killed and more than fifty wounded" (Ahmed and Lederer, 2017). The bold and unconventional attack was only one of many planned and led by Abdul Hasib while leading the Islamic State elements in Afghanistan (Ahmed and Lederer, 2017). On 27 April 2017, only eight months after the death of Hafiz Sayed Khan, Sheikh Abdul Hasib was also targeted and killed by the U.S. government (Soufan Center, 2018). Rather than using a drone or air strike in the operation, a joint raid was coordinated between the U.S. Army Rangers and Afghan special forces into the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan (Ellis and Starr, 2017). The raid was successful and resulted in the death of Hasib and thirty-five other members of the Islamic State (Ellis and Starr, 2017). Once



again, this blow weakened the command structure and operational capabilities of the Islamic State for a limited period of time.

After Hasib's death, Abu Sayed succeeded him as the leader for the Islamic State in Khorasan. He was already an experienced terrorist who was responsible for the planning and execution of multiple attacks in 2017. In July 2017, three months after the death of the Islamic State in Khorasan's last leader, Abu Sayed was killed by a U.S. drone strike in the Kunar province of Afghanistan (Baldor, 2017). After confirming the strike and Sayed's death, the U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis asserted that "taking out a leader creates disarray in the ranks" (Baldor, 2017). While this would prove true in the short term, after a period time the Islamic State would reconfigure their leadership to accommodate for the lost leader.

Following the death of Hasib, Qari Hekmatullah rose as the new leader of the Islamic State fighters in the Khorasan region. Before his assumption of leadership, Hekmatullah was already an accomplished commander and fighter in Northern Afghanistan who defected to the Islamic States from the Taliban (Sharb and Newlee, 2018). Hekmatullah was eventually subject to a targeted killing operation by the U.S. military in April 2018 by a drone strike (Sharb and Newlee, 2018). Immediately following the operation, the U.S. government announced that he was "an overall key commander for the group" and "its was hoped that his death would put [the Islamic State in Khorasan] back on its heels" (Soufan Center, 2018). The loss of their leader certainly did disrupt the Islamic State's operations; however, this gap was only exploited by the Taliban who made bold advances on territory immediately following Qari Hekmatullah's death (Sharb and Newlee, 2018). Moreover, as in the past, Hekamatullah's position was quickly replaced by another leader.

After his demise, Hekmatullah was replaced by Abu Sayeed Orakzai, also known as Abu Saad Erhabi, to lead the members of the Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan. Orakzai oversaw a period of intensified attacks on civilian locations while leading the terrorist organization (Soufan Center, 2018). On 25 August 2018, Aby Sayeed Orakzai was subject to a successful targeted killing operation by the U.S. military (Soufan Center, 2018). He was killed in method similar to many of his predecessors, by an airstrike from U.S. forces in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan (Sharb and Newlee, 2018). This strike disrupted the Islamic State's operations and, it was hoped, led to doubt within the terrorist organization about possible intelligence sources that were feeding information to the U.S. military and Afghan government

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(Soufan Center, 2018). Despite this goal, once again the targeted killing of the leader of the Islamic State in Khorasan would prove to be unable to stop the terrorist organization from continuing operations. The Islamic State would continue their operations and attempt to expand within Afghanistan well into 2021, thus outlasting the U.S. military presence in the country as well (Doxsee and Thompson, 2021).

Overall, this is a clear case of the U.S. government adopting a policy of leadership decapitation with the hopes of combating the progress in Afghanistan made by the Islamic State in Khorasan. Even though this was a relatively new terrorist organization, with respect to the entire War in Afghanistan, the U.S. government embarked on the same strategy that was being employed against the original enemies in the conflict: the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Soufan Center, 2018). However, the resulting approach of launching a sustained targeted killing campaign against the key leaders of the Islamic State in Khorasan was far from an ideal strategy to truly counter the inroads made by the terrorist organization.

From a tactical perspective, the counterterrorism approach did have a disruptive effect on the terrorist organization and provide a temporary loss in operational tempo (Soufan Center, 2018). Yet, as evidenced in the case study, the U.S. government failed to truly take advantage of this tactical success in order to make long term progress. The Taliban, on the other hand, had no problem exploiting the opportunities presented by the U.S. targeted killing operations to seize more ground for themselves (Sharb and Newlee, 2018).

From a strategic perspective, the plan to continuously striking at the key leader of the Islamic State in Khorasan was ultimately flawed and, with the benefit of hindsight, unable to produce a long-term success. As evidenced by their continued presence and activity in the country for years after the events summarized, decapitating the leadership of the terrorist organization only led to others taking the mantle. The true failure, however, appears to be the U.S. government not learning from its past with regards to counterterrorism. While spokespeople for the U.S. government were quick to justify the targeted killings with tactical advantages, they failed to acknowledge that the practice was “a temporary disruption of a seemingly permanent threat” (Soufan Center, 2018).

The approach of using targeted killings against the Islamic State in Khorasan was ostensibly the exact same counterterrorism plan that had been employed against Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations since the beginning of the War in Afghanistan. However, the

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conflict with those organizations was still ongoing despite the use of targeted killings. The fact that it failed to produce long-term results should not be surprising. As summarized by the Soufan Center (2018), “the U.S. is in a second ongoing Afghan war of leadership attrition against a terrorist group with more than sufficient local support and recruitment.” During the span of time covered in the case, the U.S. government appears to be stuck in a stagnant mindset with regards to operations (Soufan Center, 2018). The same type of targeted killing operation was repeated against five separate leaders of the Islamic State in Khorasan and each yielded the same long term result. This highlights how, if used on its own, leadership decapitation through targeted killings is ultimately ineffective against terrorist organizations who have established support from the local population and are able to easily recruit new members (Soufan Center, 2018).

## **8 Findings**

The question at the center of this research remains: Was the U.S. targeted killing program an effective method to achieve their strategic goals during the War in Afghanistan? Having conducted a mixed-method approach to the analysis of targeted killings in the War in Afghanistan, the dissertation will now delve into the results and implications of the analysis with regards to the research question.

As highlighted in the historical background, the U.S. had three distinct strategic goals for the War in Afghanistan when it initially began in 2001. Foremost, the U.S government wanted to destroy the operational capabilities of Al-Qaeda and prevent the terrorist organization from being able to conduct further terrorist plots in the future (Department of State, 2009). Additionally, the U.S. government sought to remove the Taliban from their position of political power and governance within the country, due to their support of Al-Qaeda which afforded the terrorist organization safe haven in the country (Department of State, 2009). Finally, the U.S. government wanted to help develop the infrastructure, political system, and security institutions within Afghanistan in order make it capable of maintaining its own security (Department of State, 2009). These advancements would, in theory, prevent the country from being used a safe haven by terrorist organizations in the future, thus denying Al-Qaeda grounds to plan and train.

As the conflict lasted over a decade and kept persisting, the strategic goals of the U.S. government shifted in significant ways. In 2015, the U.S. National Security Strategy reaffirmed the government's goal of combatting terrorism in Afghanistan and the greater region but there were also implied limits on the support that would be given (White House, 2015). The success of helping to build a democratic government in Afghanistan is celebrated but is at odds with the ongoing incursions by the Islamic State, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations (White House, 2015).

However, the stage of high tempo ground combat from the early stages of the war is now past, a fact reinforced by the troop reductions in the preceding months (White House, 2015). The new goal for the War in Afghanistan, back in 2015, was to continue to support the Afghan government and ANSF to make the country stable (White House, 2015). This also entails removing U.S. forces even more from combat operations, a decision that makes the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and air strikes all the more enticing when looking for alternative ways to prosecute the conflict since the risk to U.S. forces would be heavily mitigated (White House,

2015). Yet, as seen throughout this research, targeted killings on their own would not be a panacea for the multi-faceted issues that caused and prolonged the War in Afghanistan.

### **8.1 Quantitative**

The quantitative aspect of this research entailed a correlation analysis of the rate of U.S. air strikes against the Taliban and the frequency of attacks conducted by the insurgent organization between 2015 and 2020. The results of this analysis found that while the two variables were slightly positive in relation to one another, meaning that as the rate of U.S. strikes increased then so would Taliban attacks, the degree of this correlation was incredibly low. Moreover, the findings of this assessment show that there is not a statistically significant difference in the rate of Taliban attacks and the frequency of U.S. strikes during the five year time period that the dataset covered. Taking the implication of this outcome even further, the U.S. strikes that were part of the targeted killing campaign against the Taliban did not affect the rate of the insurgent organization's attacks against the Afghan government and the U.S. military.

This finding is damning with regards to the U.S. government and their strategic goals in the War in Afghanistan. After the Taliban was ousted from their position of ruling the government in Afghanistan, the U.S. forces in the country fought to keep them from interfering or encroaching on the gains made in the early stages of the war (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Targeted killings, through precision strikes and raids, became a tool to help combat the Taliban and keep them on the fringes (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). However, as seen in Figure 1 and Table 1, the Taliban sustained an incredibly high rate of attacks from 2015 to early 2020 (START, 2022). During this time, the insurgency sustained an average of ninety-eight attacks per month over the total period (START, 2022). Over the same period, the U.S. military had an average of four strikes per month directly against the Taliban (Purkiss and Serle, 2017).

The nature of this quantitative analysis, due to the dataset selected and the intervals examined, looked at targeted killings and Taliban activity in the War in Afghanistan at the macro level. When examined at this scale, the targeted killing operations do not appear to have any effect on the operational tempo of the Taliban. Looking at the data at such a large scale, there was no evidence that targeted killings led to any level of deterrence, compellence, or long term disruption of the Taliban's operations (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006; Kirchofer, 2016). Moreover, the sustained high rate of Taliban attacks did not indicate any overt degree of backlash that led to increased recruitment and attacks (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006).

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This is not a uniform finding when looking at the greater academic literature on the subject of targeted killings, as a number of other quantitative studies of the phenomenon suggest that there is either a positive or negative relationship between targeted killings and insurgent or terrorist operations (Kaplan et al., 2005; Kaplan et al., 2006; Jacobson and Kaplan, 2007). Even when looking for the theorized strategic effects of targeted killings, this analysis shows no indication of any of them. Following the implications of this finding to its logical extension, if the use of targeted killings is not effective at lowering the rate insurgent activity, then the question arises as to why the practice was still sustained and expanded as the war in Afghanistan progressed. However, the answer to that particular query is beyond the scope of this research. What the correlation analysis did show was that, within the timeframe of the dataset, the rate of targeted killings did not have a significant relationship to the frequency of Taliban attacks. An increased rate of targeted killings did not deter the Taliban into conducting fewer attacks. Likewise, targeted killing did not incite the insurgent group to attack more often. From a macro level when looking at the Taliban and targeted killings in the War in Afghanistan, targeted killings did not successfully accomplish strategic goals but, instead, only added to the attrition of the conflict.

### **8.2 Qualitative**

The examination of case studies allowed this research to delve into targeted killings of specific individuals throughout the War in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on high level leaders of terrorist or insurgent groups. The most prominent figure subject to a targeted killing, Osama Bin Laden, yields some mixed results when looking at the strategic effectiveness of the operation. The death of Bin Laden undoubtedly had a tremendous positive effect on the morale and psyche of U.S. service members and the U.S. as a whole due to his role in coordinating and planning the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Additionally, it is hard to dispute that his death did not yield a disruption of planned operations due to his centralized leadership role within Al-Qaeda. However, the backlash of this targeted killing was swift and wide in terms of scope. Moreover, killing Bin Laden and decapitating the leadership of Al-Qaeda only led to another terrorist, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to take his place (Annamalai, 2011).

Overall, despite the catharsis gained from neutralizing the long term enemy of the U.S., this targeted killing operation likely only had tactical level benefits for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. A pessimistic view of the targeted killing, due to the timing of the targeted killing,

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could be that the death of Bin Laden was planned to serve as a high point of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and justify the departure of U.S. troops from the country (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Following this argument, the targeted killing would help justify the U.S. troop drawdown that was announced the month following the operation, in June 2011 (Laub and Maizland, 2022). From this perspective, the targeted killing of Osama Bin Laden could be seen as trying to advance the effort of ending the U.S. government's involvement in Afghanistan, rather than directly address the strategic goals of the war.

Similar mixed conclusions are shown with regards to the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansour. His role as the central leader of the Taliban led him to be targeted and killed by the U.S. government to combat the actions of the insurgent organization through leadership decapitation (Kirchofer, 2016). The aftermath of this targeted killing led to the expected short-term disruption of the Taliban's operations due to the loss of a key leader and the efforts to replace him. However, it did not lead to a decrease in violent activity or attacks conducted by the insurgent group. As relayed by Wilson and Zenko (2017), in the six months following the death of Mansour, the rate of Taliban attacks increased by more than twenty percent. Moreover, these reported attacks only included events that directly resulted in a casualty (Wilson and Zenko, 2017).

This also marked the first reported targeted killing conducted by the U.S. in Pakistan, with the prior knowledge or approval of the host nation (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). This was somewhat of a Pandora's box, as it led to diplomatic frustrations with Pakistan and international condemnation for killing a man in a country that the U.S. was not in a state of conflict with (Wilson and Zenko, 2017). While not condemning the targeted killing outright, this incident highlights the complicated nature of the War in Afghanistan, where insurgents and terrorist groups alike have no concern for borders. In fact, the borders are a feature of the war that are purposefully exploited because of the legal grey area they, ostensibly, provide. While the U.S. government ignoring these concerns for international law on the basis of a preemptive strike against a continuing threat, in this case Mansour, may be a cause for international ire, that does not mean the targeted killing was not effective.

The targeted killing of Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, the former Taliban commander who defected to the Islamic State, also highlights some of the issues of viewing targeted killings as a

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panacea to terrorists and insurgents. Khadim's death by a U.S. drone strike opened up an opportunity for the ANSF, with the support of the U.S. military, to seize and occupy the territory that had been lost to the Islamic State in Helmand province. However, the exploitation of the favorable tactical situation created by the targeted killing operation was taken advantage of by the Taliban, who were also clashing with the Islamic State in the region. This shows how effective targeted killings can be in a conflict, provided that they are executed within the scope of a greater operational plan or campaign. In this case, the targeted killing of Khadim provided a tangible tactical benefit, the noticeable disruption of the Islamic State's operations, that could have followed up with efforts to seize territory in Helmand or otherwise deny the Islamic State from using the area in the future, which would help to achieve a greater strategic goal within the war.

Finally, the systematic targeted killing of five leaders from the Islamic State in Khorasan from 2016 to 2018 makes the approach to counterterrorism appear incredibly ineffective, from a strategic perspective. While acknowledging the specific strategic context of this facet of the War in Afghanistan, the U.S. government still attempted to employ targeted killings as a cure for a complex terrorist and insurgent group. By the time of the first targeted killing examined in 2016, the Islamic State of Khorasan had already made significant gains in Afghanistan and was only growing larger due to defections from the Taliban (Ahmed and Lederer, 2017). The fact that Islamic State was able to take root in Afghanistan, as it had in other countries, was due to a number of religious and cultural reasons, which were arguably compounded by the grievances that arose in the Middle East due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

However, the approach of the U.S. government seemingly ignored these multi-faceted issues and decided that leadership decapitation through targeted killings would be effective at ending the threat of the Islamic State and allow U.S. forces to focus on stabilizing the country (Soufan Center, 2018). The repetition of targeting and killing the leader of the Islamic State of Khorasan five times, over the course of only two years, highlights how this approach failed to make any long-term gains or achieve strategic goals for the U.S. and Afghan governments (Soufan Center, 2018).

### **8.3 Key Takeaways**

The results of both analysis methods show that, within the context of the War in Afghanistan, the targeted killing program was effective at producing short-term tactical victories



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that subsequent operations could then exploit to accomplish strategic level goals. This possibility was shown multiple times during the case studies, when the killing of a key leader led to disarray within a terrorist or insurgent group. However, when executed in isolation with no follow-up action or efforts, then targeted killings were not effective at achieving long-term strategic goals in the War in Afghanistan. This was seen throughout the research, when the use of targeted killings was considered at both the macro and micro levels.

A major factor in this finding is the nature of the War in Afghanistan and, by extension, the strategic goals that the U.S. government had throughout the conflict. Initially the objectives in the conflict were fairly concrete: overthrow the Taliban government and destroy Al-Qaeda's ability to conduct terrorist operations. However, after this initial stage of the war, the U.S. government transitioned predominantly to rebuilding the country's infrastructure, government institutions, and organizations to provide security. In effect, the strategic mindset of the U.S. forces had to change with this new focus, even with the same overall goals in place. This change in approach for most of the U.S. forces, coupled with the rising prominence of drones, likely helped warp the way the conflict was viewed by leadership. Moreover, these changes also occurred while the U.S. military had occupied the country for over a decade, which arguably led to stagnation in terms of operations.

## **9 Conclusion**

Ultimately, the aim of this research was to critically evaluate whether the U.S. government's use of targeted killings was an effective way to achieve their strategic goals in the War in Afghanistan. In pursuance of an evaluation that does due diligence to the scope and complexity of the conflict, a mixed-methods approach was adopted to assess the impact of targeted killings when observed over a large span of time and in single instances. This was accomplished by first conducting a correlation analysis of the rates of U.S. strikes against the Taliban and the frequency of Taliban acts of violence, such as bombings or kidnappings, as well as overt attacks against the Afghan government and the U.S. military. There was no statistically significant correlation found between the two variables, meaning that the rates of U.S. strikes did not affect the frequency of Taliban attacks. This research then examined four case studies of targeted killings during the War in Afghanistan by evaluating the role of the individual, the method in which they were targeted and killed, and then the short and long term results of their death for their group and the U.S. mission in the war. The subjects of these case studies included Osama Bin Laden, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, and five leaders of the Islamic State in Khorasan from 2016 to 2018. The findings from these case studies varied but, overall, added evidence to show how the targeted killing did not have a sustained long-term effect on the respective group of the individual killed or the conflict.

The results of this research found that, within the context of the War in Afghanistan, targeted killings were ultimately an ineffective method of achieving the strategic goals of the U.S. government. This conclusion was directly supported by the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses. That being said, targeted killings do have utility at the tactical level of operations and planning with regards to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. A failure to recognize the difference of the two, the strategic and the tactical, will lead to a poorly executed campaign, if the War in Afghanistan is any indication.

### **9.1 Reflection**

The intention of this research was to gain insight into the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policies of the U.S. government, particularly during the War in Afghanistan. One of the most prominent and infamous aspects of this modern policy is the occurrence of targeted killings. This is likely due to the absolute nature of the practice, to take someone's life without due legal process, and the debated legal standing that is maintained to justify targeted

killings (Kretzmer, 2005; Schweiger, 2019). Moreover, while similar practices have existed in history, the planned act of intentionally targeting and killing someone due to the threat they pose to a state is, understandably, one that calls for criticism (Schweiger, 2019). The issue of legality is also compounded when targeted killings are conducted outside the scope of a designated combat area or conflict, and instead occur in another sovereign nation.

After acknowledging the shaky legal standing that targeted killings rest on, then the results of this research only serve to compound concerns about the practice continuing as a counterterrorism or counterinsurgency method. Granted, the subject of this research is heavily rooted within the context of the War in Afghanistan and, therefore, the findings from the analysis cannot be directly applied to other conflicts. Yet, the practice of using targeted killings against terrorist or insurgent groups is one that is criticized, while also the entire efficacy of the method is questionable. Put simply: if it is unclear as to whether or not targeted killings are an effective tool in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, then why employ them in the first place?

After examining the targeted killing program through the War in Afghanistan, a pattern appears of the U.S. government repeatedly using the approach to combat terrorist or insurgent groups and, seemingly, expecting a more favorable outcome despite the lack of evidence that it is an effective method. From an observer's perspective, the strategic planning of the U.S. government and military appear to be stagnant through major portions of the conflict, which leads operational approaches and tactics to be repeated. In effect, the targeted killings were only increasing the intensity of the conflict by adding an additional death toll of potential civilians deemed as collateral damage.

However, the context of the war and the political role it played in the U.S. is key to understanding the role that targeted killings played. One of the key goals of the War in Afghanistan was to enable the Afghan government and their ANSF to control and secure the country. This meant that, eventually, the use of U.S. troops had to be limited in terms of what operations could be conducted. When ground forces are restricted, then the use of air strikes and drones to combat terrorists and insurgents become the weapon of choice. It is possible, and worthy of further research and study, that the policies of the U.S. government that sought to limit and remove U.S. forces from Afghanistan also aided in the war becoming a quagmire. However, this would not happen in a vacuum, as the actions and efforts of the ANSF and the Afghan

government, before their fall to the Taliban in 2021, are key to understanding the progression of the war on the ground after U.S. troops stopped major combat operations (Laub and Maizland, 2022).

## **9.2 Implications**

Although this research is based solely on the War in Afghanistan, there are a number of takeaways regarding future counterterrorism and counterinsurgent policies for states. Foremost, is that this research emphasizes that targeted killings are not a single-step solution to addressing terrorist or insurgent groups within a greater conflict. The failures of thinking otherwise were seen repeatedly in the research, particularly in the case studies. If a purely military solution is required, then it is advantageous to incorporate targeted killings into the overall plan or campaign as a supporting effort to follow-on forces. As stated before, the targeted killings in the War in Afghanistan led to tactical level victories. By acknowledging the proper role that targeted killings should play in a counterterrorism or counterinsurgent operation, then they can be used to build up to strategic triumphs.

Second, targeted killings do not address the underlying issues that lead to individuals joining terrorist or insurgent organizations. The study of radicalization in this area is extensive but still worthy of further study, yet many of the targeted killings examined in this research seem to have been planned without factoring in that important knowledge. After examining multiple key leaders who were targeted and killed in the War in Afghanistan, there is extraordinarily little evidence in the conflict that shows how leadership decapitation results in the dissolution of a terrorist or insurgent group. Therefore, the answer to what drives these extremist groups and holds them together must be found elsewhere.

Finally, there is still the question of why targeted killings are sustained even if they do not produce results. It is easy to see how one could view the act of targeting and killing someone as a self-justifying. The targeted individual is a member of a terrorist or insurgent group, so they are inherently valid targets in an armed conflict. The fallacy in this logic, beyond the legal and moral aspects, is that then the conflict turns purely into a war of attrition. As seen throughout the research, there is evidence of this thought process and approach scattered through the entire War in Afghanistan. The disastrous end of the U.S. military presence in the country, which was quickly followed by the Taliban regaining control of the Afghan government, also stands as evidence that the U.S. approach to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations needs to

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change (Laub and Maizland, 2022). When that change comes, it is likely that targeted killings will still play a role due to the utility of the practice and the necessity of lethal operations in times of conflict. Ideally, this research can aid in the greater effort to make targeted killings an effective strategic tool in the future.

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