



**Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.**

*Intelligence and Analysis Division*

## WHITE PAPER SERIES

# The Effects of Decapitation Strikes Against Terrorist Leadership

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### **INTENT**

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



# The Effects of Decapitation Strikes Against Terrorist Leadership

## Introduction

Targeted, lethal strikes against terrorist leaders have become a common approach utilized by nations to combat the terror threat in the post-9/11 counterterrorism environment. Such strikes are commonly referred to as “decapitation strikes,” as they remove the “head” of an organization with the intention of degrading/dismantling the organization’s leadership structure (this paper will use the term throughout). However, strikes against terrorist groups may also include the targeting of leaders at a variety of different levels, to include mid-level/regional leaders. The effects of decapitation strikes against terrorist organizations have been disputed, with some analysts observing that (contrary to conventional wisdom), the removal of a terrorist leader may not actually degrade/dismantle a given organization, and could even embolden groups to ramp up recruiting efforts or conduct revenge attacks.<sup>1</sup> This paper will examine the potential effects of decapitation strikes against high-profile terrorist leadership, as well as two case studies of terrorist leaders targeted by the U.S. in recent years (Usama bin Laden of al-Qaeda and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State).

## Effects of Decapitation Strikes

Decapitation strikes may have varying effects on issues to include leadership succession, the potential for “revenge” or retaliatory attacks, as well as effects on propaganda/social media/recruitment efforts.

### *Leadership Succession*

Conventional wisdom would suggest that a decapitation strike against a terrorist organization would degrade the group’s capabilities and serve to dismantle the group’s leadership structure. However, most terrorist organizations maintain a paramilitary-style structure which allows for established or implied processes related to leadership succession. Additionally, some terrorist leaders (particularly in religious-affiliated groups such as radical Islamist groups) may serve more of a symbolic/spiritual leadership role, while operational activities are managed by other individuals, which would allow the group’s activities to continue as usual despite the loss of the public face of the organization. However, there is also potential for disagreements regarding leadership succession. Certain individuals may take issue with an apparent successor, and internal disputes could follow.

### *Revenge Attacks*

Additionally, terrorist groups may seek to conduct revenge/retaliatory attacks in response to counterterrorism operations targeting leaders (whether such operations are successful or unsuccessful). Retaliatory attacks may target the organization responsible for a given counterterrorism operation (such as a U.S. military installation in the region), or could potentially target associated symbolic targets (such as a U.S. embassy/consulate or a hotel that is known to be frequented by U.S. citizens). These attacks not only serve as retaliation for hostilities against a



group's leader, but can also serve as a "show of force" to display that the group remains operationally capable of conducting attacks.

### ***Propaganda/Social Media/Recruitment***

Furthermore, terrorists can leverage decapitation strikes for propaganda/social media/recruitment purposes. The targeted killing of a leader by a nation-state such as the U.S. could be utilized for propaganda purposes in a manner which foster sympathy for the group among potential followers/recruits, which could then potentially lead to an increase in recruiting. Additionally, such efforts could inspire lone actors to carry out attacks or other activities independent of the terror group's direction.

## **Case Studies**

The following case studies detail strikes against high-profile terrorist leaders in recent years. The following cases do not constitute an all-inclusive list of notable terrorist leaders who were killed in counterterrorism operations (nor do they adequately cover all effects associated with each leader's death), but rather they provide a baseline overview of such strikes as well as a snapshot of the effects that followed.

### ***Usama Bin Laden***

On 02 May 2011, Usama bin Laden, the founder and leader of the terror group al-Qaeda, was killed by U.S. special operations forces at his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. In the days that followed the raid, al-Qaeda issued a statement vowing to seek revenge for the killing of bin Laden, adding that "Sheik Osama didn't build an organization to die when he dies."<sup>2</sup> Other militant Islamist organizations issued similar statements, and Taliban suicide bombers conducted a retaliatory attack on a Pakistani military base (Pakistan is believed to cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the region) just over a week after bin Laden's death on 13 May, killing dozens and injuring over 100 others.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, analysis of a jihadist website showed that page views of bin Laden's material spiked nearly tenfold in the day following his death, although there was no lasting long-term effect.<sup>4</sup>

Roughly a month after bin Laden's death, in June 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's designated second-in-command, reportedly assumed command of the terror group, highlighting the group's paramilitary structure as it relates to leadership succession.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Usama bin Laden's son Hamza was being groomed to ultimately succeed Zawahiri, although this succession plan was cut short in 2019 when Hamza was reportedly killed in a U.S. counterterrorism operation.<sup>6</sup> Still, Hamza had vowed to avenge his father's death, and the bin Laden name attracted attention from current and aspiring members of al-Qaeda.

The success of decapitation strikes against al-Qaeda leadership is subject to some debate, as al-Qaeda struggled to compete for relevance in the jihadist world alongside the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Still, leadership succession plans were clearly established, and al-Qaeda and sympathetic groups such as the Taliban were able to leverage Usama bin Laden's death for propaganda purposes as well as retaliatory attacks.



### ***Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi***

In late October 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. raid in Syria. Baghdadi was the leader of the Islamic State terror group, which was known for directing and inspiring a significant number of deadly attacks throughout the globe, as well as establishing a self-proclaimed caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup> Although Baghdadi's death was announced less than two months ago at the time of this paper's production, several observers have feared that retaliatory attacks would come.

Kurdish forces in Syria (who were a key U.S. partner in the military campaign against the Islamic State) expressed concerns that “sleeper cells will seek revenge for Baghdadi's death” to include “attacks on prisons,” as Kurdish forces hold thousands of Islamic State prisoners.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there was speculation that a terror attack carried out by a known Islamist extremist on 29 November in London could have potentially been motivated by Baghdadi's death, although an investigation is ongoing.<sup>9</sup>

The Islamic State's succession plan for Baghdadi was potentially complicated due to a follow-up strike that killed the group's spokesman (who was considered to be a likely successor to Baghdadi).<sup>10</sup> The group ultimately issued a statement confirming Baghdadi's death and that of the spokesman, while also announcing a successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi. According to NPR, al-Quraishi is largely unknown outside of the Islamic State, and other open source reporting indicates little is known about the stated successor.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, it should be noted that the Islamic State's official statement confirming Baghdadi's death (unsurprisingly) issued a warning of retaliation directed toward the U.S., though such an attack has yet to be seen.<sup>12</sup>

### **Outlook**

While decapitation strikes against terrorist leaders can accomplish a temporary disruption of terrorist groups' leadership structure, succession plans are often in place due to the paramilitary structure of such groups. Additionally, while the death of a leader is a symbolic blow, this makes such deaths appealing for propaganda/social media/recruiting purposes. Furthermore, retaliatory attacks are threatened or conducted in order to seek vengeance in response to counterterrorism operations, as well as to demonstrate that terror groups remain capable of operational activity despite the loss of leadership. Although the effects of decapitation strikes vary on a case-by-case basis, the recent U.S.-led strikes against al-Qaeda's Usama bin Laden and the Islamic State's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi highlight the potential for the aforementioned phenomena.

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