



Targeted Killings: A Note of Effectiveness

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Since the 9/11 attacks, and the ensuing “war on terrorism,” the U.S. government has engaged in a series of controversial counterterrorism policies. One such policy has been targeted killings, which have been used to try and eliminate the senior leadership of the global jihadist movement. How effective has the practice been?

The recent high profile terrorist attacks perpetrated in the U.K. have generated a resurgence in the debate surrounding counterterrorism tactics. Targeted killings, defined by Alston as the “intentional, premeditated and deliberate use of lethal force, by States or their agents...against a specific individual who is not in the physical custody of the perpetrator,” are one such tactic; frequently employed, yet extremely controversial. This practice most often takes two forms: kill/capture missions and unmanned aerial vehicle assaults (UAVs). Certainly the most well known of the former is that of the May 2nd, 2011 Navy SEAL raid on Usama bin Laden’s Pakistan compound. The use of UAVs has become much more common, with a recent Director of National Intelligence report indicating that 473 drone strikes had resulted in the deaths of around 2,500 terrorists and between 64-114 civilians. Such civilian fatalities, criticized by independent organizations to be a low estimate, illustrate the largest criticism of the policy; that it can be, as it is even from China’s perspective, “a blank space in international law (that is) subject to abuse”.

These issues have kindled a spirited discussion among scholars, but have yet to influence the policy’s role as a favoured strategy amongst policymakers. Former President Obama, whose administration was responsible for the program’s significant expansion, declared just last year that “none of ISIL’s

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leaders were safe” and they were “going to keep going after them”. President Trump has also indicated that he plans to continue with the program, [recently noting](#) that “the terrorists and extremists and those who give them aid and comfort must be driven out from our society forever”.

It would seem that the moral and legal consequences of targeted killings have been, at the very least, overlooked given the intense focus and leeway that has been granted to combating the global jihadist movement (GJM). However, this preference for the use of targeted killings as counterterrorism has become increasingly hard to rectify given the mounting lack of empirical evidence to support its effectiveness. Indeed, a host of previous investigations into contexts both within and outside of the GJM has yielded a complex picture. This picture is one that does not necessarily indicate resounding ineffectiveness, but one that does not garner particularly strong support for the strategy either. Rather, conclusions regarding the capability of targeted killings vary by how the incident is perceived (discriminate vs. indiscriminate violence), what outcome is studied (group desistance; frequency versus severity), the type of leader killed (position in the group; presence of a tribal elder), and characteristics of the organization (size, structure, and ideology).

Evaluating effectiveness

Image credit: [U.S. Air Force photo/Lt Col Leslie Pratt](#).

Taking into account these nuances, my own [work](#) demonstrates that this policy has largely failed to decrease GJM-related terrorism, utilizing the Global Terrorism Database’s [definition](#) of, “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through

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fear, coercion, or intimidation.” Rather, such killings, in the form of both kill/capture and UAVs, have been unsuccessful at decreasing the especially noxious outcomes resulting from jihadi terrorism; namely, casualties, along with the more detrimental attacks involving high civilian deaths and suicide attackers. Perhaps even more disconcerting, the deaths of certain al Qa’ida leaders like that of al-Awlaki, the infamous cleric responsible for many a terrorist’s radicalization, have led to an increase in incidents, or a backlash effect.

Examining a slightly varied predictor in the form of monthly killings has yielded similar conclusions, again in the form of an increase in casualties. Still other al Qa’ida leaders’ deaths have produced decreases in terrorism incidents, while at the same time increasing other types of attacks. This displacement phenomenon is not new to studies of crime and terrorism, but adds to the general conclusion that targeted killings have yet to render consistent successes.

While I have also discovered support for the notion that targeted killings are an effective deterrent, these findings are largely outweighed by the above. It would appear that this tactic, as one of the leading scholars on leadership decapitation Jenna Jordan [notes](#), “is not enough to effectively fight a strong and emboldened terrorist organization.” Nevertheless, it may be too early to designate targeted killings a complete failure. As Brian Forst has argued, “a failure to find is not at all the same as a finding of failure.” Certainly, other research has noted the short-term benefits like those present in [the work of](#) Patrick Johnston and Anoop Sarbahi, the lack of attacks on the U.S. Homeland, and the possibility that there are other purposes to the policy like that of retribution.

Although not directly assessed in my work, the totality of countermeasure evaluations have become increasingly supporting of Laura Dugan and Erica Chenoweth's contention that conciliatory, rather than punitive efforts, are the key to fighting terrorism. Actions like that of removing curfews, releasing prisoners, or even meeting to discuss issues have demonstrated their effectiveness in decreasing violence within the Israel-Palestine conflict. Even investigations outside the context of terrorism, like Matthew Dickenson's study of Mexican drug-traffickers, are similarly reflective of the idea that incentives rather than punishments offer the most promise. Specifically, Dickenson has suggested that improving both the economic and law enforcement environments are better counter-narcos strategies than that of leadership removal. Jordan has also suggested that al Qa'ida's organization, which tends to be bureaucratic, and its communal support, have been integral to its ability to rebound from killings. While such killings have the potential to affect the former, it is the opinion of this researcher that conciliatory efforts may have the best shot at addressing the latter.

Conclusion

All in all, and given the issues surrounding terrorist negotiation coupled with an ideology that is fraught with human rights' violations, conciliatory actions are likely to remain unpopular. As the U.S. continues to fight a movement that has been responsible for a quarter of all deaths and injuries from terrorism, the policy of targeted killing is likely to remain. Perhaps, at the very least, this strategy could be coupled with other efforts that address the larger causes and correlates of terrorism, like that of larger macro-level predictors.

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