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When to Strike: Exploring the Variables That Lead To Successful Decapitation Strikes

Renzo Pierres
University of Central Florida

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WHEN TO STRIKE:
EXPLORING THE VARIABLES THAT LEAD TO SUCCESSFUL
DECAPITATION STRIKES

by
RENZO PIERRES

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the
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Thesis Chair: Andrew Boutton, Ph.D.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to determine how different variables can affect a terrorist group's reaction to a targeted leadership strike, known as a decapitation strike. Decapitation strikes often produce unwanted results, such as a splintering of the terrorist group, or a failure to destroy the group. It is important that we understand which variables can lead to a group's destruction after a decapitation strike, to maximize the decapitation's effectiveness. In my research I have determined that group size, group ideological extremism, and the role of the leader targeted all have a substantial impact on the success of the decapitation strike. Using these three variables, I will examine three groups which have varying size, extremism, and leadership, and determine whether the decapitation strikes were successful and how these variables affected the results.

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Introduction

Terrorism has been an issue that states have had to deal with for a very long time, and different tactics have been used to combat this global threat. Terrorist groups like Boko Haram and ISIS have killed many people and proven resilient to the range of tactics countries use including mass arrests, military raids, and precision strikes. One of the most widely-used strategies for dealing with terrorist groups is known as “decapitation,” and it involves the removal of terrorist leadership via arrest or targeted killing¹. This tactic, despite its popularity, has not always produced desirable results, often leading to terrorist groups being unaffected or splintering into potentially more dangerous groups. This is a great concern for any nation attempting to fight terrorism, and therefore it is important for nations to know the circumstances in which this tactic is most effective.

In this paper I will attempt to discover the variables that lead to a terrorist group dissolving or splintering after the killing or capture of a leader. In this paper, I propose that the variables that will most affect how a terrorist group is affected by decapitation are: the group’s size, how ideologically extreme the group is, and the role of the targeted leader. I will analyze several different groups that were subjected to this tactic and identify which variables affected the group’s reaction to a decapitation strike. My findings will show that each group’s unique characteristics affect their reaction to decapitation strikes, and thus governments must explore these characteristics before committing to a strategy of decapitation.

¹ Manes, Aaron, 2008, *Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing Its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Groups Activity?*, page 40.

Decapitation research

Price (2012) argues that decapitation tactics “significantly increases the mortality rate of terrorist groups,”² using the duration of the group post-decapitation as his metric of effectiveness. He claims that terrorist group’s “unique organizational characteristics” increase the importance of the leaders and thus creates instability inside the group when those leaders are killed³. Price argues that violent groups have increased group cohesion and are led by charismatic leaders which make finding replacements harder than in non-violent groups⁴. These two factors make leadership transitions difficult.

With those parameters in mind, Price makes the argument that decapitation of terrorist groups is effective because of their violent, clandestine, and value-based organization⁵. He also shows that the earlier a group is decapitated, the shorter the time until the group disappears. While factual, his findings do not answer my question of whether decapitation strategies effectively combat terrorist groups and reduce their ability to carry out strikes. While it is apparent that groups tend to disappear after some decapitation strikes, Price deliberately doesn’t consider if terrorist violence is reduced. This is an important factor in determining if a group splintered, and therefore his findings are limited.

² Bryan C., Price, 2012, *Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism*, Page 11.

³ Price, 2012, page 11.

⁴ Price, 2012, page 17.

⁵ Price, 2012, page 43.

Jenna Jordan (2014) argues that some groups can continue to operate and carry out attacks after a decapitation strike because of two variables: bureaucracy and popular support⁶. She argues that groups which are highly bureaucratized and have large popular support can survive these attacks because the leadership is less important. Moreover, larger and older, and thus more bureaucratized, groups, as well as religious ones, which often enjoy public support, are the most resilient to decapitation strikes⁷.

Aaron Mannes (2008) attempts to find out if “decapitation strategies have a statistically significant effect on the targeted organization’s terrorist activity⁸.” Mannes admits that 24,000 out of the 34,000 cases of terrorism in his data base are attributed to “unknown actors, which might make it difficult to prove his theory. This was one of the main reasons why Price decided to instead narrow his research to group longevity instead of activity. Mannes also divided the groups into “group type,” which included nationalist/separatist, religious, communist/socialist. Mannes found that decapitation strikes and strikes that are followed by “crackdowns” reduce the incidents of attacks by these groups, and for smaller groups it can lead to complete destruction of the organization⁹. While Mannes’ findings shed light on whether these strategies are statistically useful, his lack of variables aside from the type of organization fail to answer the question of why some groups of the same “type” are affected differently by decapitation strategies.

In her other work, Jenna Jordan (2008) uses social network analysis¹⁰ to determine the type of structure that groups have and how this relates to the effectiveness of decapitation strikes,

⁶ Jordan, Jenna, 2014, *Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes*, page 11.

⁷ Jordan, 2014, page 15.

⁸ Manes, 2008, page 41.

⁹ Manes, 2008, page 43.

¹⁰Jordan, Jenna, 2009, *When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation*, page 728.

she also attempts to find conditions that increase the likelihood a group will collapse after a decapitation¹¹ and compares the lifespan of the group after the strike with other groups that have not undergone decapitations, and whether this decapitation affected the group's ability to attack. She divides the groups by organization type, age, and size, and found that decapitation strikes are not an effective means of reducing violence or destroying groups and is the least effective against older, larger, religious, and separatist organizations. As Jordan explained in her later work, older organizations become bureaucratized which facilitates the replacement of leadership, especially in large organizations¹²; separatist groups also arise from social movements which are often decentralized and enjoy mass public support. Jordan's findings are significant because she addressed not only the lifespan of groups after, but also the effects on their ability to carry out attacks which is an important but sometimes overlooked element.

Patrick Johnston (2012) attempts to ascertain the efficacy of decapitation strikes by analyzing many successful and unsuccessful removals of terrorist leadership¹³. Johnston only focuses on cases where the top leadership was targeted because killings of other individuals might lead to misleading results¹⁴. All the strikes observed come from asymmetric conflicts, in which terrorist groups operate in civilian population, using guerrilla tactics, and from a minimum month-long campaign. Johnston found that "neutralizing insurgent leaders has a substantively large and statistically significant effect on numerous metrics of counter militancy effectiveness",¹⁵ moreover, the fact that Johnston compared failed and successful decapitations is

¹¹ Jordan, Jenna, 2009, page 731.

¹² Jordan, 2014, page 15.

¹³ Johnston, Patrick, 2012, *Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns*, page 49.

¹⁴ Johnston, Patrick, 2012, page 54.

¹⁵ Johnston, Patrick, 2012, page 77.

interesting because many other studies don't distinguish between failed decapitations and non-existent decapitations, which can lead to wrong conclusions. By only examining successful instances of decapitation, one cannot learn about the instances in which decapitation creates undesired effects, Overall Johnston found approximately a 25-30% increase in a government's likelihood to defeat a terrorist organization, which is much higher effectiveness percentage than previous studies.

Stuart Koschade (2006) uses social network analysis to understand how terrorist cells communicate and operate, as well as what knowledge can be gained which might help with counter-insurgency operations¹⁶. This framework is useful for understanding what roles individuals play in these organizations and which members are more likely to disrupt the operations of the organization¹⁷. Koschade then relates this concept to how Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) operates, particularly in the context of the 2002 Bali bombings in which the group operated cells that coordinated the attacks independently from the organization. Koschade then creates a graph connecting each member of the cell, with their specific function and how many other members are connected to that one specific member¹⁸.

He later finds that organizations must balance covertness with efficiency, the more connected all the members, efficiency increases but covertness decreases, as communications between members become easier to track. This means that the more covert a cell, the more effective targeting of an important "node" is, in JI one member was the only point of contact

¹⁶ Koschade, Stuart, 2006, *A Social Network Analysis of Jemaah Islamiyah: The Applications to Counterterrorism and Intelligence*, page 559.

¹⁷ Koschade, Stuart, 2006, page 560.

¹⁸ Koschade, Stuart, 2006, page 567.

between the two cells, meaning targeting such a member would likely hinder their operations greatly¹⁹. This article helps make the decision of who is the ideal target in a decapitation operation, as the idea of “leadership” can be hard to identify, rather by using a social network analysis you can identify the point of contact of specific cells or organizations and target them. However, leadership is often more complicated than who oversees coordinating actions of multiple members, and this article only covers the tactical operations of individual cells rather than groups. Furthermore, in only focusing on the tactical aspect of terrorist organizations, this fails to address the ideological importance of leaders in terrorist groups. While killing a tactical leader in a terrorist organization might lead to a decrease in the group’s ability to carry out attacks, it most likely will not lead to the group’s dissolution.

Ethan Bueno de Mesquita (2008) tries to assess the structural factors that can affect a group’s likelihood to form factions and subsequently splinter after a major event, like the death of a leader. Mesquita finds that as economic conditions improve, groups become less able to mobilize and recruit but more extremist, and as a group becomes more extremist, the likelihood of a splintering decreases. However, if a splinter does occur, the splinter group will be even more extreme than the original, which could increase the ferocity of the attacks and spoil possible peace agreements²⁰.

Terrorist groups can also increase the cost of splintering, which makes a group more extremist when a faction is fighting for control of the group, but otherwise decreases a group’s

¹⁹ Koschade, Stuart, 2006, page 571.

²⁰ de Mesquita, Ethan B, 2008, *Terrorist Factions*, page 408.

extremism²¹. While not really offering many concrete and applicable answers to determine when terrorist groups will splinter, which is very important for counterinsurgency strategies, the paper does provide some variables which are worth exploring. Firstly, the idea that factions can affect a group's extremism is interesting, as it might imply that more extreme groups are more vulnerable to leadership decapitation because of the lack of factions present. Moreover, the study's findings that an improvement in the economic situation of the populace and a place for non-violent grievance resolutions increases extremism means that the presence of such variables could be useful when combined with a decapitation strike.

Seth Jones and Martin Libicki (2008) examined terrorist groups that no longer exist to try to draw conclusions on how future groups might also end. The authors claim that most groups end when members stop armed struggle and join the political process or when law enforcement arrest or kill key members of the organization²². They also use 5 variables to determine which one is more likely to help decide the fate of a terrorist group: ideological motivation, economic conditions, regime type, size, and goals²³.

Policing, which is the second-most-common way terrorist groups end, works by eliminating the terrorist organization, which includes leadership and logistics through the passing of laws and arrests of perpetrators²⁴. Because terrorist groups operate in the civilian population, police have a unique ability to gather intelligence and infiltrate these groups, to arrest its

²¹ de Mesquita, Ethan B, 2008, page 409.

²² Jones, Seth G., and Martin C. Libicki, 2008, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qaeda*, page 9.

²³ Jones, Seth G., and Martin C. Libicki, 2008, page 15.

²⁴ Jones, Seth G., and Martin C. Libicki, 2008, page 27.

members. Their data also shows that the larger a group is, the less likely a group is to end by policing or by splintering, but very likely to end because of a turn to politics²⁵.

Audrey Kurth Cronin (2006) uses the decline of Al Qaeda, a large and very dangerous terrorist group, to draw conclusions on how similar groups might end in the future. She poses that terrorist groups generally end because of: the death or capture of the leader, failure to recruit the next generation, achieving their goals, transitioning to a political organization, lack of popular support, repression, or transition to other types of violence²⁶. I will mostly focus on the first of the scenarios that end terrorist groups, the killing or capture of their leader. She claims the group's structure, presence of a viable successor and the existence of a cult of personality all affect how effective this tactic is²⁷.

She then applies each of the likely end-scenarios of terrorist organizations, which I again will focus on the killing or capture of leadership of the terrorist organization. She explains that Al-Qaeda's fluid structure, emphasis on independent cells, and lack of cult of personality means it can survive decapitation²⁸ much easier than other groups. While this article has a limited application to decapitation, and mainly focuses on many other reasons terrorist groups end, much can still be learned, mainly that a group's structure, the role of the leader, and the presence of a viable successor are a good indicator of the effectiveness of decapitation. However, all the examples provided for why decapitation is sometimes effective were of leaders who were

²⁵ Jones, Seth G., and Martin C. Libicki, 2008, page 42.

²⁶ Cronin, Audrey Kurth, 2006, *How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups*, page 17.

²⁷ Cronin, Audrey Kurth, 2006, page 18.

²⁸ Cronin, Audrey Kurth, 2006, page 40.

captured and later told their followers to stop the armed insurrection, which is a variable that was not mentioned.

Hypothesis

Based on the previous literature, my hypothesis suggests that the variables that are most likely to determine a group's future after a decapitation strike are: how extreme the group is, the size of the group, and the role of the leader targeted. To reiterate, a decapitation is the intentional killing or capture of high-ranking members of an organization, with the intent to disrupt or destroy the group because of the lack of leadership. I believe with these variables that the group which will be most likely to dissolve and not splinter after a decapitation is a small, extreme group, in which the leader targeted serves as the ideological core of the group. Any counterterrorism or counterinsurgency strategy is ultimately supposed to lead to a reduction in violence, and other studies often consider splintering as a counterinsurgency success. In this paper I make the clear distinction between dissolving and splintering because if a group dissolves but its fighters carry on the struggle, that ultimately does not lead to a reduction of violence.

Small groups naturally have less members, and thus possess a reduced ability to replace dead leadership. Leaders of small groups also have more contact with a larger percentage of the overall members thus increasing their importance. Larger organizations also become bureaucratized and develop standardized procedures for their leadership which reduces the strategic impact of the loss of leadership, and the time required to acquire new leadership. While large groups are less susceptible to dissolve after decapitation, their large numbers increase the likelihood factions will form and the group will splinter. As any organization grows, different members with different agendas appear, this creates different factions within the organization

that could take advantage of the loss of leadership to create a new, often more extreme group after the leader dies. To reiterate, this variable will increase the likelihood of a group splintering and reduce the likelihood of the group dissolving after suffering a decapitation.

Extreme groups have a reduced ability to recruit new members due to the difficulty for average people to connect with the group's message. This reduces their ability to replace leadership and recruit new members when they are killed. The extremism of a group's ideology also reduces the likelihood of factions forming, this is likely because factions are often more ideologically extreme than the group they are a part of. This reduction in factions reduces the chance of splintering, although if the group does splinter, the new splinter group will rank higher on the ideological extremism scale. In summary, as a group's ideological extremism increases, the likelihood the group will dissolve after a decapitation strike increases and the likelihood of splinter groups forming decreases.

And lastly, as previous research shows, eliminating leaders who are responsible for carrying out operations often has a tangible effect on reducing a group's ability to act but often does not result in the destruction of the group. However, targeting a leader who is responsible for the group's ideology, or an ideological leader, increases the likelihood of the group dissolving. When a tactical non-ideological leader is targeted, terrorist organizations can easily find replacements from other senior members or from the targeted leader's subordinates. Targeting the ideological leader of a group often results in the group disbanding if no successor is in place due to the morale impact of losing such an important member. Due to the nature of ideological leaders, it is also much more difficult to find replacements for these leaders that people will

follow with the same fervor as the previous leader. All the previously mentioned literature has proposed that these individual variables can affect a group's future after a decapitation, but none of them have used all the variables I mentioned and applied them to specific groups. To reiterate, targeting an ideological leader increases the likelihood of the group dissolving but has an unclear effect on the likelihood of a group splintering.

In this section, I will test my hypothesis by analyzing successful and unsuccessful cases of terrorist decapitation, across similar groups with different previously mentioned variables. I will categorize each group according to those variables, and how I believe those variables will affect the group's likelihood to either: be destroyed or splinter, after a decapitation. I will be using case studies rather than large datasets due to the problems that are inherent in any large data set of terrorist groups, such as mis-categorization and broad categories that are unhelpful to the question we are trying to answer. For example, large data sets often don't describe who they consider a "leader," or often make no distinction between a group splintering and disappearing.

By examining each group individually, we can better understand which variables are affecting this specific group, which will help us make predictions on how the decapitation will affect them. The groups that I will choose will be affected differently by the previously mentioned variables, but will all be subjected to decapitation strikes and their results will be compared. The groups that I have chosen are: the Muslim Brotherhood, Sendero Luminoso, and the Taliban. I chose these groups because each of them has experienced leadership decapitation and they all fall on different ends of the spectrum in relation to size, ideological extremism, and the role of the targeted leader.

Decapitations must be viewed like any other counterinsurgency tool, and only be applied to certain groups in certain conditions. I believe decapitation strategies are used much more than they should be because it allows governments to claim tangible progress against insurgencies is being made. However, while decapitations may make for great publicity and help a government show its people progress, this strategy often does not lead to a long-term reduction in violence. For groups in which decapitations will not be effective, like a large, non-ideologically extreme group with a non-ideological leader, other strategies like peace negotiations must be used.

Case Studies

The first group I have chosen is Sendero Luminoso (SL) or “the shining path.” SL is a communist revolutionary party that has been waging a guerrilla war against the government of Peru since the 1980s. The group started in the 1960s in the poor Peruvian state of Ayacucho, an isolated area of the country where the government was largely absent and communication with the rest of the country was difficult²⁹. The state had one major university which became both a recruitment center for students and attracted many politically motivated individuals, including the group’s eventual leader Abimael Guzman Reynoso³⁰. It was in this university that Guzman built the Shining path into the insurgency that would sow chaos in Peru, training teachers to spread socialist ideas³¹, and securing weapons and money to wage a socialist revolution against the government of Peru³².

SL was a small group originating in the isolated state of Ayacucho and totaling about 5,000 fighting members at its peak³³ with as little as 350 members remaining active to this day³⁴. Being a communist revolutionary party, which calls for armed insurrection against non-communist nations, SL ranks high on the ideological extremism spectrum. SL’s prominent leader, Abimael Guzmán, served not only the operational leader of the group but also as the

²⁹ Art, J, Robert, and Richardson, Louise, 2007, *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past*, page 197.

³⁰ *Ibid*, page 198.

³¹ *Ibid*, page 199.

³² *Ibid*, page 200.

³³ Manwaring, Max, G, 1995, *Peru’s Sendero Luminoso: The Shining Path Beckons*, page 160.

³⁴ BBC, 2015, *Peru admits Shining Path rebels have not been 'exterminated'*, (accessed February 25th, 2019), paragraph 2.

ideological base and he fostered a cult of personality around him,³⁵ as evidenced by his presence in the group's propaganda posters.

Peru's government created a specialized police unit to gather intelligence and apprehend SL leadership, and this strategy eventually led to the capture of many of its leaders including the ideological leader Abimael Guzman in 1992. Two years after the capture of Guzman, SL ceased being a major threat to the government³⁶ and, while some of its members remain to this day³⁷, the group is all but destroyed. Decapitation was very successful against the SL, it took only two years for the newly-created specialized police unit to apprehend Guzman, and two years after his arrest the group ceased to be a threat to the government of Peru³⁸.

The next group I will be examining is the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban formed in the 1990s from veteran fighters who repelled the Soviets during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Taliban took advantage of the power vacuum within the country and fought for control over the nation with other groups. In 1996 the Taliban took control of the government and established a government that reflected its interpretation of Sharia law, which included abuses against women and non-Muslims. The Taliban was ousted from leadership by the U.S. in 2001 during the invasion of Afghanistan and have since started an insurgency in the nation and currently control parts of the country³⁹. Because of the changing nature of the Taliban, from political

³⁵ Art, J, Robert, and Richardson, Louise, 2007, page 203.

³⁶ Art, J, Robert, and Richardson, Louise, 2007, page 207.

³⁷ *Ibid*, page 216.

³⁸ *Ibid*, page 207.

³⁹ Laub, Zachary, 2014, *The Taliban in Afghanistan*, page 7.

organization to terrorist group, this paper will focus on the Taliban after their ousting by the United States in 2001.

As of 2014, the Taliban is believed to possess around 60,000 members in Afghanistan⁴⁰, which is a medium-to-large number of fighters, but since the Taliban has gained strength in recent years, the number of fighters is likely much higher. Being an Islamist fundamentalist group, the Taliban ranks high on the ideological extremism scale but not as high as other groups operating in the area such as ISIS. The Taliban has also been subjected to many decapitations strikes as well as arrests and killing of many of its members⁴¹, but those strikes have been unsuccessful in destroying the Taliban and the group has survived over a decade of U.S. occupation. The Taliban leadership has been targeted many times, but the leaders targeted are not high-ranking ideological leaders but rather operational commanders in charge of day-to-day operations. While these strikes influenced the Taliban's ability to carry out attacks, they have been consistently able to replace their leadership and thus those strikes have not been successful in dismantling the organization⁴².

The last group I will examine is the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is an Islamist political and religious movement with ties to the larger international Muslim Brotherhood, and at one point one of the biggest parties in Egypt. Founded in 1928, the group quickly grew to over a million followers and 2,000 branches in Egypt alone⁴³,

⁴⁰ Waldman, Matt, 2014, *Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan intervention shows why the US must empathize with its adversaries*, page 4.

⁴¹ Wilner, S. Alex, 2010, *Targeted Killings in Afghanistan: Measuring Coercion and Deterrence in Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency*, page 308.

⁴² Wilner, 2010, page 316.

⁴³ Zollner, Barbara H, E, 2009, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan Al-Hudaybi and Ideology*, page 11.

the group also operated a paramilitary force which trained volunteer in guerrilla warfare⁴⁴. The MB has a history of both being a political party which frequently clashed with contemporary governments and financing para-military groups, that history has not changed much with the modern MB. The MB continued to clash with the governments of the times, but after the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in 2011⁴⁵, the MB entered an agreement with the military government of Egypt to co-operatively run the nation⁴⁶ after the election.

The MB then ascended to power on June 24th, 2012, under the presidency of Mohamed Morsi⁴⁷. Morsi continued the previous administration's repressive policies, gave government positions to loyal MB members⁴⁸, and used MB militias to attack the growing opposition to the Islamist government. The military eventually ousted Morsi, prompting large protests by the MB and allied Islamist organizations, resulting in a clash against government forces that left over 1,000 people dead⁴⁹. The government subsequently arrested an estimated 42,000 supporters and almost all the MB leadership⁵⁰, and the group was declared a terrorist organization by the government⁵¹. After the crackdown, a more extreme side of the MB became visible, calling for Egyptians to "rise in revolt" and asking for jihad against the new regime and "martyrdom"⁵²; it is very likely the MB splintered after the government crackdowns, as evidenced by the shift in rhetoric.

⁴⁴ Zollner, Barbara H, E, 2009, page 12.

⁴⁵ Selim, M, Gamal, 2015, *Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood: the triangle of counter-revolution*, page 180.

⁴⁶ Selim, M, Gamal, 2015, page 185.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, page 189.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, page 190.

⁴⁹ Brown, J, Nathan, and Dunne, Michele, 2015, *Unprecedented Pressures, Uncharted Course for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood*, page 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, page 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, page 6.

⁵² *Ibid*, page 13.

Being one of the largest political organization in Egypt, which won an election and briefly ruled the nation, the MB ranks high in terms of overall size and is by far the biggest group I will be exploring in this paper. The MB, while being an Islamist group, was mainly a political organization that advocated for representation in Egypt's repressive system and thus ranks low on the ideological extremism scale. MB, like most political organizations, has very charismatic leaders, but these leaders do not serve as the ideological core of the organization. Like most political organizations, MB can find replacements for its leadership but not without difficulty. Lastly, MB leadership has been routinely arrested in Egypt and that has largely eradicated the group, although this has caused splintering within the group that gave rise to more extreme elements.

In conclusion, this paper aims to explore the different variables that affect a group's likelihood to dissolve or splinter after a targeted assassination or arrest of its leadership, also known as a "decapitation." The variables that I will be examining in this paper are: a group's size, their ideological extremism, and the role of the targeted leader; all these variables have a direct effect on the group's future post-decapitation. In this paper I will be using case studies to test my hypothesis rather than large datasets, because case studies allow for a broader look into the causal mechanisms that lead to each group's fate after decapitation strategies. The three groups that I will be studying in this paper have all been chosen because of their differences in size, ideological extremism, and role of leadership targeted; these groups are: the Taliban, Sendero Luminoso, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It is my objective to determine how these variables affect terrorist groups post-decapitation, so nations can make informed decision about when to remove terrorist leadership.

Sendero Luminoso

The history of Sendero Luminoso, hereafter referred to as SL, begins with the creation of the Socialist Party of Peru in 1928⁵³. The Socialist Party of Peru splintered into over 20 groups following international events such as the Sino-Soviet split and Khrushchev's denouncing of Stalin⁵⁴. One of the biggest splits happened between the Soviet bloc, which supported peaceful transition into Socialism, and the Maoist bloc, which supported violent uprising⁵⁵. A split within the Maoist bloc led to the creation of the Communist Party of Peru – By Way of the Shining Path of Mariategui, led by a university professor named Abimael Guzman⁵⁶.

The group first spread throughout Guzman's university, creating student study groups to spread their ideology within the university and the urban centers around it⁵⁷. After this, the group began sending activists to the countryside, involving themselves in local town meetings and becoming teachers in the local schools⁵⁸. SL also established cells in other universities, including two important universities in Lima and absorbing more radical individuals from other leftist organizations active in Peru⁵⁹.

⁵³ Tarazona-Sevillano, G, and Reuter B, David, 1990, *Sendero Luminoso and the Threat of Narcoterrorism*, page 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, page 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, page 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, page 2.

⁵⁷ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, *Shining path: Guerrilla war in Peru's Highlands*, page 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, page 6-7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, page 7.

Ideological Extremism

The ideological extremism of the SL is illustrated by the fact that even in socialist circles, this faction of Maoism was deemed too extreme for the already extreme Maoist bloc. Unlike other leftist organizations in Peru, which were constantly creating and breaking alliances to win general elections, SL saw violent insurrection as the only way to bring socialism to Peru⁶⁰. Another important aspect for determining SL's extremism are the tactics the group used to achieve its goals. SL's base of support came from the peasantry, and the group wanted to further isolate the peasantry from the government, so SL would become the de facto authority in the area⁶¹. The rural areas in which SL focused its efforts were already largely ignored by the government. SL's main department, Ayacucho, saw little government presence and did not have a paved road until late 1970s⁶².

SL captured and killed cattle rustlers, cracked down on drunkenness and adultery, and assisted with irrigation efforts in the area⁶³. In villages where SL could not infiltrate and involve itself inside, the group relied on more direct tactics, like assassinating local village leaders who opposed the group's attempts to establish itself as de-facto rulers⁶⁴. These villages showed open hostility towards SL and the two often clashed, leading to bloodshed and mass migration of peasants towards the city-centers⁶⁵. It is because of all these factors that I rank SL's ideological extremism as very high, and the most extreme group I will be analyzing here.

⁶⁰ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, page 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, page 29.

⁶² Art, J, Robert, and Richardson, Louise, 2007, page 197.

⁶³ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, page 29.

⁶⁴ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, page 31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, page 31.

Group size

The nature of SL, being an insurgency centered around isolated rural communities, makes it very difficult to determine the true size of the insurgency at its peak. It is estimated that at its peak, SL was only able to field 5,000 fighters⁶⁶, and thus it is a small group and the smallest group I examine in this paper. While SL was able to become dominant in these sparsely-populated communities, and threaten the Peruvian government, the group did not have substantial national support⁶⁷. Therefore, I consider the SL insurgency to rank low on the size scale, specially when compared to the other groups I will be discussing in this paper.

Role of leader

Guzman played a central role in the group not only helping its creation but cementing and spreading the group's ideology through his influence in UNSCH⁶⁸ and creating a strong leadership cadre to carry out its war⁶⁹. Guzman was not only responsible for the tactical decisions of the group, such as sending its members into rural communities to gather support for SL⁷⁰, but he was also the ideological center of the group. Guzman's speeches were spread throughout SL, and their tone changed from discussing Marxist theory to a call to violent action, with Guzman at the top⁷¹. Guzman's role as the ideological leader of the SL is further illustrated in accounts of SL guerrillas yelling "long live chairman Gonzalo (Guzman)"⁷² during battle.

⁶⁶ Manwaring, 1995, page 160.

⁶⁷ Palmer, David S, 1994, *Shining Path of Peru*, page 219.

⁶⁸ Degregori et al, 2012, *How Difficult It Is to Be God*, page 74.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, page 75.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, page 75.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, page 87.

⁷² Strong, Simon, 1992, *Shining Path Terror and Revolution in Peru*, page 126.

The structure of SL is complex, with a national committee headed by Guzman and a small number of lieutenants and then 6 regional committees which operate with a degree of autonomy⁷³. While all these regional committees operate autonomously, they all followed directives set by the national committee. These include instructions regarding group ideology, war strategy and policy. SL's ideology was carefully crafted by Guzman to appeal to the rural support base that the group relied on and based its whole identity on. The ideology targeted the grievances held by the rural population and pointed to imperialism as the enemy⁷⁴. Just as Guzman was responsible for creating and spreading the group's ideology, the reliance on him as a central figure would eventually lead to the group's downfall.

Counterinsurgency efforts

Before the Peruvian government began targeting the leadership of the SL, they resorted to using tactics such as arresting and executing villagers suspected of being SL members⁷⁵. Members of the Peruvian armed forces would also burn down villages and steal supplies suspected of belonging to SL members, as well as cover up any executions the armed forces carried out⁷⁶. The military failed to integrate with the rural population and protect them from the SL and would often carry out retaliatory raids against the peasantry following an SL attack⁷⁷. These tactics were not effective at dislodging the SL from these areas, and often caused the peasants to view the armed forces and the government negatively.

⁷³ Palmer, David S, 1994, page 190.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pages 45-46.

⁷⁵ Strong, Simon, 1992, page 127.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pages 128-129.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, page 133.

To further exacerbate matters, the government often deployed police forces that did not speak the villager's language and were of a different race than the majority-indigenous rural populations. This added racial tensions to the human rights abuses perpetrated by the government, and further drove villagers into the arms of the SL⁷⁸. Human rights violations by the government against civilian populations often increases the popularity of terrorist groups operating in the area. Because SL's Maoist ideology painted its struggle as a fight between the repressed rural population and the capitalist urban class, these abuses were even more effective at increasing SL's popularity by painting the group as protectors of the rural class.

Many of the villagers that supported the SL were acting out of fear for their lives, SL extorted business owners and killed or harmed those that refused⁷⁹. The military only made matters worse, their numerous human rights abuses not only served to further alienate the villagers but also drive them closer to the SL. The military crackdowns in 1982 and 1983 lead to the creation of the SL's People's Guerrilla Army, which SL general Huaman claims helped "[protect] the population"⁸⁰. While knowledge of the atrocities committed by the SL were widespread, pressure was mounting against the government to address the human rights abuses committed by the military. In 1985, President Garcia fired three generals as a response to human rights violations⁸¹, violence escalated as the SL saw this as a sign of weakness and struck Lima, attacking restaurants and resulting in 18 months of state of emergency⁸².

⁷⁸ Art, J, Robert, and Richardson, Louise, 2007, page 201.

⁷⁹ Strong, Simon, 1992, page 137.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, page 138.

⁸¹ Strong, Simon, 1992, page 143.

⁸² *Ibid*, page 144.

Targeted Decapitations

Between 1988 and 1989, the Peruvian government changed its strategy for defeating the SL, adopting a variety of political, social, and psychosocial as well as military strategies⁸³. In 1990, the government began to focus on winning the support of the local populations by providing services, thus painting the military as protectors of the people rather than antagonists⁸⁴. To solve the underlying racial problems, the government stationed soldiers which spoke the villager's language inside the villages themselves to improve cooperation between military and rural populations. The government also began to crackdown on abuses and create militias inside the villages which could fight SL long enough for the government forces to arrive⁸⁵. This change in government policy was definitely a correct choice and likely had an effect in the group's eventual dissolving.

After 1992, the Peruvian government adopted a different counterinsurgency, moving away from large-scale crackdowns of the civilian population and more towards operations targeting the SL leadership⁸⁶. In May 1992, the government passed the "repentance law" which granted amnesty or reduced the sentences of captured SL fighters⁸⁷, to encourage guerrilla fighters to desert. The army had previously been able to capture some of SL's top Central Committee members, such as Osman Morote in 1988 and Sybila Arrendodo in 1990,⁸⁸ but the capture of these members did not have a significant effect on the insurgency. This may be because

⁸³ Art, J, Robert, and Richardson, Louise, 2007, page 204.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, page 204-205

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, page 205

⁸⁶ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, page 169.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, page 169.

⁸⁸ Palmer, David S, 1994, page 201.

these lieutenants did not represent the ideological center of the group but were only in charge of the operational side of the insurgency.

This new change of strategy also led to the capture of the groups' ideological leader Abimael Guzman in 1992⁸⁹, dealing the biggest blow to the group. Guzman was not only the group's founder and leader, but a personality cult was created around him to promote group cohesion, morale and fighting spirit⁹⁰. After Guzman's capture, many fighters voluntarily gave up and took advantage of the amnesty law, while others began cooperating with the intelligence services to further speed up the end of the group⁹¹. While some of the provincial committees managed to survive the period after the capture of Guzman, they lacked the ability to recruit new members outside of their small area and became easy targets for the government to eventually eliminate⁹².

Sendero Luminoso is often viewed as one of the biggest successes regarding targeted removals of terrorist leadership, or decapitation, and with good reason. Scholars consider the capture of Guzman to be the pivotal moment in the fight against SL⁹³. By the end of 1994, SL no longer posed a serious threat to the government or the people of Peru⁹⁴. Up to that point, the Peruvian government was fighting a losing battle against the SL, their tactics often leading to villagers resenting the government and the army. The army eventually moved away from mass retaliations against the civilian population and into operations targeted at removing the

⁸⁹ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, page 173.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, page 174.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, page 174.

⁹² *Ibid*, page 191-192.

⁹³ Pillar, R, Raul, 2004, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy*, page 137.

⁹⁴ Art, J, Robert, and Richardson, Louise, 2007, page 207.

leadership of the SL. The tide turned against the group when their ideological leader, who was responsible for crafting the ideology of the group and spreading it to recruit new fighters, was captured in 1992. The importance of Guzman's capture is illustrated by the many fighters that either abandoned the conflict and returned to society or began cooperating with local authorities' shortly after his capture⁹⁵.

It is important to note that SL largely did not splinter after the capture of Guzman, while small remnants of SL continued to operate⁹⁶, these still followed the ideology and objectives of Guzman. Splintering, when factions inside terrorist groups break off from the main group, is one of the possible outcomes that can occur after a decapitation strike, but this did not happen after the death of Guzman. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita (2008) finds that as a group's ideological extremism increases, the likelihood that a splinter faction will arise after a decapitation strike decrease⁹⁷. I propose that this is the reason that a splinter faction of SL did not arise after Guzman's capture, as I previously demonstrated the group's ideological extremism was quite high.

Sendero Luminoso was a small group, only able to establish itself in rural communities and lacking strong national support for their cause. The group was also ideologically extreme, demonstrated not only due to their use of terror against civilian populations that refused to support them, but also by the fact that even other Marxists and Maoist organizations considered them too extreme. The group's downfall also began after their ideological leader was captured in

⁹⁵ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, page 174.

⁹⁶ Taylor, Lewis, 2006, page 191-192.

⁹⁷ de Mesquita, Ethan B, 2008, *Terrorist Factions*, page 408

1992, something that did not happen when other members of the national committee were captured. SL is the perfect group to illustrate my hypothesis that small, extreme groups in which the targeted leader serves an ideological role are the best targets for decapitation operations.

The Taliban

The Taliban is an insurgent group currently waging an insurgency in Afghanistan, and with a large presence in nearby Pakistan⁹⁸. The Taliban's origins date back to the 1980s during the anti-Soviet Jihad when Mullah Omar, a Pashtun tribesman from Ghilzai, first mobilized his followers in response to the kidnapping and rape of teenage girls by a local warlord⁹⁹. The Taliban largely belong to an ethnic group known as the "Pashtun," and derive much of their identity and conduct from their ethnic identity¹⁰⁰. The Pashtuns living in Pakistan belong to the same ethnic group as the ones living in Afghanistan, and consider all Pashtuns as one people, separated by artificially created borders¹⁰¹. The group continued to grow and eventually seized control of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, in 1996 and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan¹⁰².

During their years as the de-facto rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban enforced their own version of Sharia law¹⁰³ upon the civilian population of Afghanistan, which was previously making strides toward gender equality¹⁰⁴. The Taliban passed laws forbidding women from working, limited a woman's movement unless accompanied by a male close relative, demanded that women wear Burqas in public, and forbid the use of high heels¹⁰⁵. Women were also not

⁹⁸ Farrell, Theo, and Giustozzi, Antonio, 2013, *The Taliban at war: inside the Helmand insurgency, 2004-2012*, page 849

⁹⁹ Noury, G. Abdul, and Speciale, Biagio, 2016, *Social constraints and women's education: Evidence from Afghanistan under radical religious rule*, page 824.

¹⁰⁰ Amineh, Ahmed, 2019, *Understanding the Taliban case through history and the context of Pukhtunwali*, page 86.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, page 87.

¹⁰² Noury, G. Abdul, and Speciale, Biagio, 2016, page 824.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, page 821-822.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, page 825.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, page 825.

allowed to use the same medical facilities as men, ride bicycles, or appear on television; the Taliban created religious police that would publicly punish people who broke religious law. The Taliban also sought to restrict women's education, forbidding women above the age of 8 from attending schools, killing teachers and attacking students on their way to school ¹⁰⁶.

After the September 11th attacks, the United States declared war against the Taliban government which was harboring Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda training camps. By December of 2001, the Taliban government was defeated, removing its presence from the area almost entirely and eradicating its political influence¹⁰⁷. After the fall of the Taliban, most fighters hid their weapons and returned to their homes, with a lot of commanders fleeing to Pakistan. Local warlords aligned with the new U.S.-backed government replaced the Taliban as governors, and these groups returned to exploiting the local populace¹⁰⁸. Because the new government was backed by the U.S., this painted the abuses committed by the warlords as an extension of U.S. policy. This abuse of power by forces aligned with the new government and, by extension the U.S., increased tensions with the villagers and facilitated the return of the Taliban¹⁰⁹.

Counterinsurgency efforts

The Taliban in Afghanistan had now evolved into an insurgency, small groups from Pakistan infiltrated the country and prepared for an invasion into Afghanistan¹¹⁰. Between 2004 and 2006, the Taliban tried to stir up local support in the villages it occupied, they first captured

¹⁰⁶ Noury, G. Abdul, and Speciale, Biagio, 2016, page 825.

¹⁰⁷ Rasanayagam, Angelo, 2003, *Afghanistan: A Modern History*, page 252.

¹⁰⁸ Farrell, Theo, and Giustozzi, Antonio, 2013, page 846-847.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, page 847.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, page 849.

villages before moving on to provincial capitals¹¹¹. The International Security Assistance Forces, created and lead by NATO, responded to the Taliban insurgency with indiscriminate use of force which led many civilians to flee into the arms of the Taliban¹¹². A popular revolt in Nad-e Ali was started by the ISAF forces destroying poppy fields, and the Afghan government stealing what little compensation the British offered the farmers¹¹³.

The period between 2005 and 2006 saw an increase by over 400% in the number of suicide attacks, a doubling of IED attacks, and a tripling of armed attacks, violence rose an additional 27% in 2007¹¹⁴. Taliban forces began deploying in larger numbers as the insurgency grew, from company sized units of up to 100 fighters in 2005 to battalion-sized units in 2008, showing the group's growth and ability to move undisturbed¹¹⁵. The Taliban did not focus on population centers, but rather occupied villages and recruited supporters from rural areas, utilizing ambush and hit-and-run tactics against the Afghan and U.S. security forces¹¹⁶. The Taliban also began reducing its numbers of foreign fighters, relying more on local tribespeople for its main force, and keeping foreign fighters as IED manufacturers and trainers¹¹⁷.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan at first glance looked like a major victory. In less than two months, the Coalition forces were able to topple the Taliban administration and institute an interim government. However, as the years went by, the Taliban increased their presence in the area and eventually they were able to pose a significant threat to the U.S.-backed regime. The

¹¹¹ Farrell, Theo, and Giustozzi, Antonio, 2013, page 850.

¹¹² *Ibid*, page 851.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, page 852.

¹¹⁴ Jones, Seth G, 2008, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, page 49.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, page 51.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, page 50-51.

¹¹⁷ Farrell, Theo, and Giustozzi, Antonio, 2013, page 857.

Taliban continues to exist as an insurgency resisting the current Afghani government¹¹⁸ which the West continues to support militarily and economically. The Taliban currently contest 66% of Afghanistan while fully controlling 4%, and regularly carries out attacks against the war-weary Afghanistan government¹¹⁹.

Targeted Decapitations

In 2009, the U.S. strategy against the rapidly growing Taliban insurgency changed, away from simple counterinsurgency operations and towards a strategy of targeted killing against insurgent leadership¹²⁰. Eliminating all the Taliban became a very difficult task, so the U.S. decided to instead eliminate the Taliban leadership to demoralize the fighters and force them to abandon the insurgency¹²¹. Because of this clear shift in policy, the period after 2008-2009 will be used to analyze the effectiveness of these strikes on the Taliban.

In 2008, the U.S. killed Mullah Mahmoud, an important Taliban commander and several mid-level IED makers, yet this had little effect on the Taliban's advance¹²². This is demonstrated by their ability to attack Sarposa Prison in Kandahar City shortly after the death of the commander, freeing 300 Taliban fighters¹²³. The Taliban lost many of its mid and high-level leaders in the period between 2008 and 2009, yet this did not lead to a decrease of cohesion or operational ability¹²⁴. The Taliban were often able to recover from the loss of leader within days

¹¹⁸ Noury, G. Abdul, and Speciale, Biagio, 2016, page 825.

¹¹⁹ Sharifi, Shoaib, and Adamou, Louise, 2018, *Taliban threaten 70% of Afghansitan*, BBC finds.

¹²⁰ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, *Beheading the Hydra? Does Killing Terrorist or Insurgent Leaders Work?* page 296.

¹²¹ Wilner, 2010, page 323.

¹²² Long, Austin, 2014, *Whack-a-Mole or Coup de Grace? Institutionalization and Leadership Targeting in Iraq and Afghanistan*, page 505.

¹²³ Long, Austin, 2014, page 505.

¹²⁴ Long, Austin, 2014, page 506-507.

of the attack, and the increase in instances of leadership decapitation increased the number of attacks carried out by the Taliban¹²⁵.

Moreover, these night raids the U.S. used to eliminate Taliban leadership increased local support for the Taliban, according to General McChrystal. These killings, rather than incentivize the less-motivated fighters to throw down their weapons, might encourage them to adopt more violent means¹²⁶. Insurgent leaders are usually not afraid of death, because they see the struggle as being bigger than themselves, and state violence only serves to reinforce this mentality¹²⁷. External pressures, such as leadership decapitations, are also useful in unifying a movement or a group, as was the case in 2007 when 13 factions of fighters formed a coalition which became the Pakistani Taliban¹²⁸.

Local warlords and tribes also used the United States as a mechanism to elevate their own status, and to settle old disputes. In 2004, locals accused a tribal leader of working with the Taliban, to benefit economically from the tribal leader's absence¹²⁹. This led to the United States bombing the tribal leader's house and the leader joining the Taliban, the area which was once friendly to the U.S. became a hot zone of insurgent activity¹³⁰. This situation highlights another issue with the U.S. strategy of decapitation, and that is reliance on intelligence which may be incorrect, and can lead to increases of violence, rather than a reduction.

¹²⁵ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, page 304.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, page 305.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, page 306.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, pages 307-308.

¹²⁹ Dorronsoro, Gilles, 2010, *Afghanistan: the impossible transition*, page 9.

¹³⁰ Dorronsoro, Gilles, page 10.

The U.S. expanded its decapitation efforts between 2010 and 2013, often carrying out 5 raids a night by July of 2010¹³¹. From roughly August 11th to November 11th, Special Operations forces averaged 17 missions per night, capturing 368 Taliban leaders and leading to the arrest of Mullah Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban, in Pakistan¹³². The Taliban experienced no loss of cohesion due to these attacks, and their ability to carry out their own strikes did not seem to diminish, evidenced by the assassination of Kandahar's provincial police chief in April 2011¹³³. The U.S. strategy of leadership decapitation did not lead to either a short-term reduction in operational capability or a mass exodus of less fanatical fighters and a destruction of the Taliban.

Another counter-productive by-product of the strategy of decapitations is the creation of a younger and more ideologically extreme Taliban insurgency. The night raids in 2010 and 2010 reduced the age of the average Taliban leader by 10 years. Whereas before the extremist youth represented a minority in the Taliban leadership, which prior to 2011 were balanced by the older leaders, these younger members now became the loudest voice in the group. This may explain why violence escalated after the removal of leadership, as previously discussed¹³⁴. Now that I have demonstrated how the U.S. strategy of leadership decapitation was not effective, I will explore the variables which I believe were most responsible for this failure.

¹³¹ Long, Austin, 2014, page 507.

¹³² *Ibid*, page 507.

¹³³ *Ibid*, page 507-508.

¹³⁴ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, page 312.

Size

The Taliban insurgency was estimated to have as many as 40,000 core fighters in 2012¹³⁵ and 60,000 in 2014, a sharp increase from the 10,000-20,000 fighters it was estimated to have in the mid-2000s¹³⁶. This makes the Taliban a large insurgency, although not the largest one I will be examining in this paper, and this is an important variable that will affect the group's reaction to decapitation strikes. According to Jenna Jordan, large groups are less susceptible to decapitation strikes due to the redundant positions in the leadership, which spreads command across several individuals and allows for those positions to be filled. Her research also shows that larger organizations are more likely to rely on local networks for their operation¹³⁷, which is the case with the Taliban¹³⁸, and these local networks are more resistant to decapitation strikes. I believe the Taliban's large size is one of the reasons that the group was not defeated through decapitation strikes.

Role of leader targeted

The Taliban's top leadership structure includes essential military and political guerrillas and commanders, and these were the target of the new U.S. strategy of leadership decapitation¹³⁹. These leaders saw the fight in Afghanistan through a lens of radical Islam, painting the conflict as a fight between Islam and the infidel West, which now included the government in Kabul¹⁴⁰. Pashtun leadership is characterized by its dynamic and headless nature,

¹³⁵ Giustozzi, 2017, *Counterinsurgency Challenge in Post-2001 Afghanistan*, page 15.

¹³⁶ Waldman, 2014, page 2-3.

¹³⁷ Jordan, Jenna, 2009, page 728.

¹³⁸ Farrell, Theo, and Giustozzi, Antonio, 2013, page 852

¹³⁹ Long, Austin, 2014, page 505.

¹⁴⁰ Jones, Seth G, 2008, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, page 40.

leaders are chosen for their personal charisma and their ability to prove themselves daily¹⁴¹. The group's leader Mullah Omar, while highly charismatic and influential in the group, stopped playing a meaningful part in the Taliban since 2006¹⁴², possibly due to poor health.

The Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, was not responsible for the group's ideology and behavior like Guzman was for the SL. This is illustrated in his opposition to the use of suicide bombing, which was expanded against his orders. Omar's influence was not enough to stop the increasingly-common usage of suicide bombings against civilian populations, even as he publicly denounced the practice¹⁴³. If the Taliban had an ideological leader, and Omar is the closest to one the Taliban had, this practice would not have continued.

This lack of an ideological leader, who dictates the behavior and dogma of the group, might be one of the reasons the U.S.'s multiple decapitation strikes were never able to stop the insurgency. Cronin Audrey (2006) argues that targeting leaders who have fostered a cult of personality increases the likelihood of successful decapitation¹⁴⁴, and the lack of an ideological leader in the Taliban makes this strategy ineffective. Most of the efforts focused on the "middle management" of the Taliban, which were easily replaced and did not lead to a decrease in violence or cohesion within the Taliban¹⁴⁵. The Taliban was able to replace the leadership lost due to U.S. strikes and grow the size of the insurgency after 2009, the acceleration of the U.S.'s policy of decapitation.

¹⁴¹ Liebl, Vern, 2007, *Pushtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam and Taliban: A Short View*, pages 496-497.

¹⁴² Giustozzi, 2017, page 15.

¹⁴³ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, page 313.

¹⁴⁴ Cronin K. Audrey, 2006, page 18.

¹⁴⁵ Long, Austin, 2014, pages 505-506.

Extremism

The Taliban are an Islamist extremist group and they rank medium-high on the extremism scale, while they were religious extremist, they were not as extreme as other groups in the area. The Taliban enforced their version of Sharia law when they were in power, abolishing non-Islamic festivals, banning all music and dancing, and prohibiting the flying of kites¹⁴⁶. They also rolled back gender equality efforts in Afghanistan, banning women from working and wearing “revealing clothing,” as well as being outside without a close male relative¹⁴⁷. Compared to other Islamist extremist terrorist groups, like ISIS, the Taliban does not wish to establish a global caliphate but rather establish sharia law within Afghanistan and end the “foreign occupation” of Afghanistan¹⁴⁸. It is because of these reasons that I have placed the Taliban on the medium-to-high scale for ideological extremism, but not as high as a group like Sendero Luminoso.

Extremism is an important variable because, as it increases, the likelihood that a splinter faction of the group will develop decreases¹⁴⁹. This may explain why the Taliban did not experience the “fissures” and “strife between competing groups” that U.S. military leaders expected to see¹⁵⁰. Outside group pressures can sometimes even strengthen groups, as evidenced by the formation of the Pakistani Taliban¹⁵¹, and this goes against the objective of decapitation. I

¹⁴⁶ Rasanayagam, Angelo, 2003, page 198.

¹⁴⁷ Rasanayagam, Angelo, 2003, page 198.

¹⁴⁸ Azami, Dawood, 2015, *Why Taliban special forces are fighting Islamic State*, paragraphs 20-21.

¹⁴⁹ de Mesquita, Ethan B, 2008, page 408.

¹⁵⁰ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, page 307.

¹⁵¹ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, page 307.

believe both these group's higher levels of extremism contributed to the lack of splinter factions forming after decapitation strikes.

There are a couple of variables which are not explored in depth in this paper but that help explain why the Taliban insurgency was so resilient to U.S. efforts, and that is the ethnic nature of the Taliban insurgency and the help of neighboring Pakistan. The Pakistani political party Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam preached about the importance of Sharia and ran networks of Islamic schools that regularly trained Taliban leadership and recruits¹⁵². Afghan insurgents also used Pakistan as a safe staging grounds for offensive operations, the Taliban benefitted hugely from the ethnic ties they shared with Pakistani villagers on the border with Pakistan¹⁵³. The existence of a haven in Pakistan reduced effectiveness of the decapitation strikes because new leaders could be recruited and trained in Pakistan, and the fact these new leaders shared ethnic ties with the insurgency increased the group's cohesion.

The failure of this strategy of decapitation supports my hypothesis that the Taliban's qualities, their large size and lack of ideological leadership, makes the group highly resistant to the loss of leadership. Many mid-and-high-level leaders were captured during the period I am examining, and this did not seem to have a meaningful impact on the group. The U.S. hoped that the death of these leaders would bring fewer extreme fighters to surrender, like we observed after the capture of Guzman in Peru. I believe the Taliban's resilience to decapitation strikes provides good evince to support my hypothesis.

¹⁵² Jones, Seth G, 2008, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, page 62.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, Page 58.

The Taliban is a perfect case study of what variables decrease a group's likelihood to be severely affected by a decapitation strike. None of the many attempts by the United States to destroy the group by targeting its leadership lead to a reduction in its ability to threaten the Afghan government long-term. I believe this is due to the lack of an ideological leader in the Taliban whose loss would demoralize the group, and the fact that the group is large enough that finding replacements is simpler. The Taliban, while being an Islamic fundamentalist group, is also not the most extreme insurgency operating in the area, and this has been shown to be a factor in reducing the likelihood the group will be severely affected by a decapitation strike. All these variables created a group that not only survived multiple decapitations but flourished in those subsequent years and is now in control of a large part of Afghanistan.

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamist political organization based in Egypt and established in 1928. The group began as a mass-opposition movement and quickly amassed over a million followers in Egypt by 1948. At first, the group was concerned with educational reform, but later evolved into a religious and political movement that criticized Egypt's political system¹⁵⁴. While the M.B. was largely unable to obtain political power, partially due to their belief that the government system did not follow the guidelines of Islam, the group's influence in society continued to grow¹⁵⁵. The M.B. also operated its own para-military force which was created in 1936 to help the Palestinian uprising¹⁵⁶ and later used to carry out assassinations against government officials in Egypt. In 1948, the government of Egypt designated the M.B. as a terrorist organization and ordered the group's dissolution¹⁵⁷.

In 1952, a group known as the Free Officers overthrew the government of Egypt, and the M.B. voiced their support for the new government. At first the M.B. and the new regime cooperated, but their relationship continued to deteriorate as the Brotherhood's influence grew and in 1954 the M.B. was once again targeted by the government until 1971¹⁵⁸. Members of the M.B. were gradually released from prison and in 1975 a general amnesty for M.B. members was issued, freeing the remaining members of the organization¹⁵⁹. The M.B. continued to operate

¹⁵⁴ Zollner, Barbara H, E, 2009, page 10.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, page 11.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, page 12.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, page 13.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, page 25.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, page 48.

with a half-legal status¹⁶⁰, and its legality would continue to change throughout the years and with each change of government.

During the 1980s, the Brotherhood focused on changing Egypt through democratic channels, and achieved electoral success by allying with the Wafd party¹⁶¹, but quickly abandoned this strategy due to lack of support. In 2005, a constitutional amendment banned non-approved political parties, and the Brotherhood was once again made an illegal political organization¹⁶². In March 2006, the Egyptian government again began targeting the Brotherhood, and the Brotherhood would retreat from the political sphere only to sporadically organize protests¹⁶³. During this period of oppression, the Brotherhood reverted to its roots of serving the people and senior leaders even considered turning the Brotherhood into a charitable organization¹⁶⁴.

In 2011, the Egyptian revolution, which was part of the Arab Spring, toppled the government and created hopes of a truly democratic Egypt. These hopes that quickly faded as the new Egyptian government persecuted the revolutionaries and worked with the United States to serve its interests in the region¹⁶⁵. The Egyptian military and the Muslim Brotherhood thus hijacked the revolution and took positions of power in the new Egyptian government¹⁶⁶. The new government put Islamists and Brotherhood members in a council which introduced amendments

¹⁶⁰ Zollner, Barbara H, E, 2009, page 49.

¹⁶¹ Brownlee, Jason, 2010, *The Muslim Brothers: Egypt's Most Influential Pressure Group*, page 424.

¹⁶² Brownlee, Jason, 2010, page 423.

¹⁶³ Brownlee, Jason, 2010, page 426.

¹⁶⁴ Brownlee, Jason, 2010, page 427.

¹⁶⁵ Selim, M, Gamal, 2015, page 177-178.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, page 179.

to the constitution and eventually gave the new parliament the power to draft the new constitution.

With the Brotherhood's help, the new amendments were approved with 77% of votes, and secured Brotherhood control of the next parliament¹⁶⁷. During the parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Morsi secured 52% of the votes and became the country's president,¹⁶⁸ shortly after issuing a decree that expanded his powers¹⁶⁹. Nationwide protests, and the Brotherhood's use of violence, lead to many deaths and injuries¹⁷⁰ until July 3rd when the Egyptian military overthrew the Morsi regime began cracking-down on the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁷¹. The Muslim Brotherhood is different from the other groups I discuss in this paper because, while it has a history of supporting militias, it is mainly a political organization. Decapitation strikes against political organizations may not have the same effects as they do against insurgent groups, and may actually drive people to further violence.

Targeted decapitations

As previously mentioned, decapitations can either take the form of killings or arrests of a group's leadership, and the new military government carried out a policy of mass-incarcerations against the Brotherhood. Due to the Brotherhood long history with government crackdowns, I will focus on the period after the ousting of Morsi in 2013. In late 2014, the number of people in jail exceeded 42,000 and included almost all the Brotherhood's leadership, as well as thousands

¹⁶⁷ Selim, M, Gamal, 2015, page 180.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, page 188.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, page 189.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, page 191.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, page 195.

of its local supporters¹⁷². The Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organization and the government tied the Brotherhood to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis which is currently carrying out an insurgency against the Egyptian government¹⁷³. In June 30th, 2015, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi pledged that death penalties for Brotherhood leaders would be enforced, and a few days later nine alleged Brotherhood members were killed during a government raid¹⁷⁴.

While the Egyptian government utilized a strategy of decapitation against the Brotherhood, as evidenced by the arrest of almost all the Brotherhood's leaders, the government also used mass-incarceration against Brotherhood supporters¹⁷⁵. This goes against the general philosophy of decapitations, in which only the leaders are targeted, in the hopes the less-committed members will abandon the cause¹⁷⁶. This is an important variable when examining the Egyptian government's actions because they may explain the success, or lack thereof, of this strategy. The Egyptian government's policy of mass-incarceration may result in more people becoming radicalized and take up arms, as I will demonstrate below.

However, this crackdown by the government did not lead to the dissolving of the Muslim Brotherhood, as the group has a long history of being targeted. Rather, the older members who lived in exile called for peaceful protests the Al-Sisi regime, calling for a return to the societal outreach that made the Brotherhood strong in past decades¹⁷⁷. However, the younger members blamed the older ones and called for a violent approach, creating small insurgent organizations

¹⁷² Brown, J, Nathan, and Dunne, Michele, 2015, page 5.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, page 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pages 3-4.

¹⁷⁵ Brown, J, Nathan, and Dunne, Michele, 2015, page 5.

¹⁷⁶ Wilner, 2010, page 323.

¹⁷⁷ Trager, Eric, 2016, *Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days*, page 230.

such as the Molotov Movement and the Revolutionary Punishment¹⁷⁸. The Brotherhood held new elections, and by 2015 90% of the new members were part of this younger generation that called for “jihad” against the regime¹⁷⁹.

There are a lot of similarities between the Taliban and the Brotherhood, which instead of disappearing after losing its leaders, they were merely replaced with younger and more extreme leaders. Moreover, the death of the older, and less extreme leaders led to an increase in violence and extremism and generated anger towards the government¹⁸⁰¹⁸¹. Revolutionary Punishment was responsible for 150 attacks on Egyptian police in its first year¹⁸², which was supported by part of the Brotherhood’s leadership. A book distributed online by a faction of the Brotherhood called for open and violent “popular resistance” against the Egyptian regime¹⁸³, further showing the increasing extremism and the rise of splinter groups inside the Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood has a long history of being targeted by the Egyptian government, the group’s influence increases and decreases with each new administration. But just like all the previous times the Brotherhood was targeted, the group was not destroyed but rather went into hiding and changed. It is also important to note that both during the 1948 crackdown¹⁸⁴ and the most recent crackdown, splinter factions of the group appeared¹⁸⁵, which made the group more extreme and dangerous.

¹⁷⁸ Trager, Eric, 2016, page 231.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, page 231.

¹⁸⁰ Trager, Eric, 2016, page 231.

¹⁸¹ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, page 312.

¹⁸² Awad, Mokhtar, 2017, *The Rise of the Violent Muslim Brotherhood*, paragraph 21.

¹⁸³ Awad, Mokhtar, 2017, paragraph 36

¹⁸⁴ Zollner, Barbara H, E, 2009, page 15-16.

¹⁸⁵ Trager, Eric, 2016, page 231.

Size

Statistics on the number of Muslim Brotherhood members in Egypt at the time of the government crackdown in 2013 are hard to find, but Mohamed Morsi received 5.7 million votes in the first round of elections¹⁸⁶. We cannot assume that all those voting for Morsi were Brotherhood members, but even if only a fifth of those voting were in fact Brotherhood members that still make the Brotherhood a very large organization. Currently, it is estimated there are 900,000 voting Brotherhood members in Egypt¹⁸⁷. The group's size is an important variable on both why the group was not destroyed during this crackdown, which is the most severe in the group's history¹⁸⁸.

Ideological extremism

The Muslim Brotherhood was careful to not offer a detailed view of their vision for an Egypt ruled by Islamic values¹⁸⁹, because of this I focus on the group's actions to determine their ideological extremism. During its early years, the Brotherhood used the concept of Jihad to justify its opposition to Western influence and Zionism, creating specialized paramilitary units to fight in Palestine and assassinate political rivals¹⁹⁰. However, after the Brotherhood was once again legalized, its ideological extremism had to be reduced to appeal to young voters¹⁹¹. As evidence of the Brotherhood's adoption of more mainstream ideas, Morsi's presidential platform

¹⁸⁶ The Carter Center, *Presidential election in Egypt Final Report*, page 63.

¹⁸⁷ Awad, Mokhtar, 2017, paragraph 4

¹⁸⁸ Brown, J, Nathan, and Dunne, Michele, 2015, page 1.

¹⁸⁹ Obaid, Nawaf, 2017, *The Muslim Brotherhood A Failure in Political Evolution*, page 6.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, page 6.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, page 9.

mentioned Islam and Sharia 14 and eight times respectively while topics like the economy and development were mentioned 158 and 178 times respectively.

Because of this, I rank the Brotherhood's ideological extremism between the 2011 election and Morsi's ousting in 2013 as low-to-medium, and I think this is one of the reasons why the group experienced splintering after 2013. In Ethan de Mesquita's (2008) paper, he shows that as groups become more extreme, the likelihood that the group will splinter decreases¹⁹², this is because the more extreme a group is, the more capable it is to placate its more extreme factions. Whereas the Brotherhood's insistence on peaceful resistance lead to many splinter factions becoming disillusioned with the Brotherhood and taking actions on their own. After the government's crackdown of the Brotherhood a lot of splinter groups formed¹⁹³ and as of 2016 two different factions inside the Brotherhood claim legitimacy¹⁹⁴.

Role of leadership

The Muslim Brotherhood is mainly a political organization, and the leaders of the group must be charismatic enough to be elected into those positions. Brotherhood leaders have a following, and many are considered the spiritual leaders of the group, like Yusuf Qaradawi who drew a huge crowd in 2011 after returning from exile¹⁹⁵. Although no longer a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, his influence is nonetheless important within the group, and his extremist views¹⁹⁶ appeal to the more extreme factions of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's leaders

¹⁹² de Mesquita, Ethan B, 2008, *Terrorist Factions*, page 408.

¹⁹³ Trager, Eric, 2016, page 231.

¹⁹⁴ Awad, Mokhtar, 2017, paragraph 29

¹⁹⁵ Ehrenfeld, Rachel, 2011, *The Muslim Brotherhood Evolution: An Overview*, page 70.

¹⁹⁶ Ehrenfeld, Rachel, 2011, page 72.

serve both an operational and spiritual role in the organization, and like many political groups, serve as the face of the movement and are thus susceptible to decapitation.

However, the Brotherhood does not derive its ideology from its political leaders, but rather from its general principles and the teaching of founding Brotherhood members, like Hassan al-Banna¹⁹⁷. This is in sharp contrast to a group like SL, where the group's ideology stemmed from the sermons of their leader¹⁹⁸, and the capture of their leader signified the end of the group's ideology. The group's general principles are also vague, thus allowing it to derive its ideology from multiple sources and individuals, ensuring no single member is the ideological core of the Brotherhood¹⁹⁹.

Just like the Taliban, there are several unexplored variables that might explain why the Brotherhood did not dissolve, but rather splinter, after the most severe wave of repression in 50 years²⁰⁰. I think one of the main reasons for the group's survival is its immense size and international connections, which allowed its members in exile to continue. A Brotherhood branch was open in Istanbul after the latest crackdowns, and this group is headed by Brotherhood leadership that managed to escape before arrest²⁰¹. The Brotherhood also underwent an ideological evolution after the government crackdowns, away from a policy of non-violence and espousing open violence against the Egyptian regime²⁰². This was done because of the presence of radical Islamist terrorist organizations in Egypt which seek to recruit disillusioned

¹⁹⁷ Samir, Doha, 2018, *The Muslim Brotherhood's Generational Gap: Politics in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, page 46.

¹⁹⁸ Degregori et al, 2012, *How Difficult It Is to Be God*, page 87.

¹⁹⁹ Samir, Doha, 2018, page 49.

²⁰⁰ Brown, J, Nathan, and Dunne, Michele, 2015, page 4.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, page 9

²⁰² Trager, Eric, 2016, page 231.

Brotherhood members²⁰³. Had the Brotherhood not evolved in this way, it might have lost its young members and been dissolved in Egypt.

Another important variable is the fact that the Brotherhood is not an insurgent group like the last two groups I examined. The Brotherhood used paramilitary groups to both accomplish overseas goals, like helping the Palestinian uprising²⁰⁴, and to stop opposition demonstrations, but at their core they are still a political organization. People join insurgencies because the political avenues that are used to resolve grievances are ineffective or inaccessible²⁰⁵, and targeting a political organization may very well drive people to insurgency. Decapitation strategies are meant to be used against insurgent groups, not political organizations, and this may explain why this strategy did not lead to a reduction of violence or an end to the Brotherhood.

Decapitation against the Brotherhood has led to mixed results, the group went from being one of Egypt's largest political organization and controlling the government to now being reduced to small remnants and splinter groups²⁰⁶. However, the emergence of splinter groups and the increasing extremism of the remnants of the Brotherhood have led to increased levels of violence and instability in Egypt²⁰⁷. However, the group's massive size and medium extremism have allowed it to survive so far, although many splinter factions of the group have arisen because of the government's crackdown. As the government extends their decapitation efforts,

²⁰³ Brown, J, Nathan, and Dunne, Michele, 2015, Page 10.

²⁰⁴ Zollner, Barbara H, E, 2009, Page 12

²⁰⁵ Dear, K. Patrick, 2013, page 305.

²⁰⁶ Trager, Eric, 2016, page 231.

²⁰⁷ Awad, Mokhtar, 2017, paragraph 15

and targets the younger and more extreme leaders, it is likely the group will cease to exist, although its international reach will make that very difficult.

Conclusions

These three cases confirm my hypothesis that: group size, ideological extremism, and the role of the targeted leader all majorly contribute to the effectiveness of leadership decapitation. I chose all these cases due to their different characteristics and contexts and examined why leadership decapitation did not have the same effect on all these groups. The biggest difference in these groups has been the effectiveness of leadership decapitation, ranging from total eradication of the group like in SL to no decrease in cohesion or capability like in the Taliban. Because leadership decapitation is a very important tool in the fight against insurgent groups, it is important to examine when this tool is most effective.

While all these variables play an important role in the effectiveness of leadership decapitations, the most significant variable appears to be the role of the leader targeted. Groups that derive their ideology from the leader, such as SL, are especially susceptible to leadership decapitation. This may be because the capture or killing of their leader signifies the defeat of their ideology, or because without the leader's guidance the remaining members do not know how to continue the struggle. In the case of SL, Guzman created the group's ideology through his speeches, and it was the leader's interpretation of Maoist ideology that formed the core of the movement, and once Guzman was gone the group's ideological core ceased to exist.

It is precisely this reason why I believe the Taliban was able to survive the repeated decapitations by the U.S. in the period after 2008. The Taliban did not derive its ideology from Mohammed Omar, but rather from the group's interpretation of the Quran and their Pashtun

codes. Omar's repeated attempts to stop the younger and more extreme Taliban leaders from engaging in suicide bombings demonstrates that he did not have the same role as Guzman, whose commandments would never be ignored in SL. The Taliban was able to replace its dead leadership without much effort, unlike SL which was unable to survive without its ideological leader and its ideological core.

Ideological extremism plays an important role in the group's likelihood to splinter after a decapitation, splinter groups are often more dangerous and extreme than the group they splintered from. This is quite evident in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, which after repeated arrests of its leaders and members, the group splintered into many more extreme factions which carry out violent attacks in Egypt. The Taliban, on the other hand, was able to remain cohesive after repeated decapitations, and avoid the splintering that the Brotherhood underwent. This is because the Brotherhood was not an ideologically extreme group in 2011 and was not able to cater to its more extreme members who became disillusioned by the Brotherhood after repeated decapitations and mass-incarcerations.

Lastly, groups size is a very important variable, because it allows groups to very quickly replace lost leaders and members. The Brotherhood, the largest group I examined, still had 900,000 members after all the repeated attempts to eradicate the group. The Brotherhood's size also meant they had an international presence which would further complicate the eradication of the group. The Taliban was also a large insurgency, and it was also able to replace its lost members and leaders very quickly and escalate its attacks after decapitations.

Recommendations

Now that I have shown why these variables are important when carrying out decapitation strikes, it is important to make policy recommendations to avoid unintended consequences of decapitation strikes. As clearly demonstrated, decapitation strikes can have wildly different effects on groups depending on how they are affected by the variables. Before carrying out a policy of decapitation, nations need to utilize their intelligence apparatus to attempt to understand the groups they wish to decapitate. This process will take time, but it will avoid counterproductive results, like escalations of violence, which may result from targeting the wrong groups.

Decapitations are one tool of many in the arsenal of counterinsurgency, and like any tools, it must only be used in specific circumstances. Gathering this information may take time, but the results from targeting a group that is not susceptible to decapitation strikes will likely make the situation worse. It is also important not to target just any leader, like the U.S. did in Afghanistan, but make sure the leaders that are targeted will cause the downfall of the group. If the recommendations laid out in this paper are followed, I believe this will lead to much more successful decapitation strikes.

If decapitations are not useful in those scenarios, the question remains on how to deal with large, non-ideologically extreme groups that do not have ideological leaders. Luckily, those groups are the easiest to deal with politically. If a group has large public support, as reflected by its large size, it is very likely they have a valid political criticism and addressing that criticism

might lead to a reduction in violence. Political solutions to insurgencies are often not very popular, since the population might feel anger towards these groups, but if the ultimate goal is a reduction of violence, these solutions should at least be considered.

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